

a case of you

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a case of you

by [ausgezeichnet](#)

Summary

Ilya and Shane soulbond with a handshake in a freezing parking lot in Saskatchewan. It actually doesn't change very much, until Shane's concussion drives everything haywire, forcing them into close proximity and an earlier confrontation with all the feelings they've been trying to ignore.

Or: as it turns out, it's easier than you'd think to be in someone's head and still not know how they feel.

Notes

i'm baaaaaack! hope ya missed me. I know there are a million and one hollanov fics being written these days, so thanks for opening mine. title from Joni Mitchell.

this is mostly complete, but I wrote a flashback/canon rewrite section that felt way too long to drop in the middle of a one-shot, so I'm breaking it into chapters.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1: The Hit

There were only two situations in which Ilya allowed his side of their soulbond to open fully so he could feel the true weight of the connection between them: when he and Shane were playing hockey together, and when they were fucking. Every time, for Ilya, it felt like someone reaching out to take his hand in a dark room, a startling reminder that he was not alone even inside his own head.

Ilya stepped out onto the ice for warm-ups in their game against Montreal and visualized turning a tap to the left, opening his mind to the river of the bond. The first detailed impressions of Shane's emotions began to trickle through. Currently Shane was irritated at how something felt in the hip that he was in the middle of stretching on the ice. Ilya smiled to himself as he roved around the rink, ostensibly warming his leg muscles with light skating but really giving himself a chance to savor the open bond.

He knew that most of the league would be appalled at the idea of soulmates playing against each other as competitors, perhaps even more appalled than at the idea of two NHL stars in a gay relationship. But the truth was that their emotions on the ice were more or less the same, although often reversed. Intense focus and determination, they always shared. Then there was satisfaction matched with frustration. Joy and devastation in equal measures. It had been disorienting at first, experiencing both poles at the same time, but focusing on hockey while simultaneously focusing on keeping the bond closed in such close proximity had proved impossible, despite Shane's stubborn insistence that they had to try.

Ilya secretly loved the way it intensified the games they played against one another. As they lined up to take the first faceoff of the game, he felt the wall of Shane's determination directly pitted against his own will. As they cycled through shifts, the extra awareness of each other's position made it easier to track the other person and slam each other into the boards, but Ilya suspected that they would be doing that in any universe, bond or no bond. Something drew them inevitably together, like compatible magnets placed in the same table – all it took was a single nudge, and they would snap back together with inexorable force.

That was why he had to end things, for good this time. Shutting down the connection was getting more and more difficult. The more often they saw each other, the more time they spent together, the closer they pressed, the more strands wove their way in the golden rope of the bond that tied them together. The stronger the bond became, the more emotions they shared. The last thing that Ilya needed was to give Shane Hollander more access to his head. If Shane found out how much Ilya loved him, there would be no breaking them apart, and the connection between them was already dangerous enough.

With all that in mind, Ilya still allowed himself to enjoy the wide-open bond as they played, squabbling over the puck and racing each other down the rink towards the Boston goal. He savored the taste of Shane's satisfaction as they pushed each other. He loved hockey, sure, but not the same way that Shane did, and it was thrilling to experience even the secondhand impressions of his boundless love for the sport.

Then Cliff Marlow came out of nowhere with a clean, brutal hit, and Shane was thrown on the ice like a ragdoll.

Ilya nearly went down with him. The bond had been open on the ice, but now it felt like a dam had burst. It was like Shane was shouting his emotions directly in Ilya's ears. The noise of the arena faded away as the overwhelming impression of pain and fear crowded against the base of his skull, and Ilya wobbled on his skates, resisting the urge to drop to his knees as the trainers reached Shane.

"Hollander?" he asked, although he couldn't hear anything through the ringing in his ears. He tried to reach out through the bond as well, but it was like shouting into a waterfall. Something was *wrong*.

He saw Hollander's lips moving, mouthing what looked like his name.

"Is he all right?" Ilya asked. He could feel that he wasn't. Hollander was cold, and confused, and terrified, and broadcasting so loudly that Ilya could barely hear himself think.

The trainers moved Shane onto the spinal board. Ilya started to shake as he was pushed out of the way by the increasing number of trainers and paramedics crowded around Shane on the ice, unable to control the tremors snaking down his limbs from that spot at the back of his skull. His whole nervous system felt alight with lines of lightning pain.

"Is he all right?" he tried one more time, through lips that felt numb. Shane's lips were moving, but he still couldn't make out anything that he was saying. He would have found it slightly reassuring to see that Hollander was awake, if he didn't have the bond screaming a dissonant note in his ear.

As the trainers began the process of carrying Shane off the ice, Cliff drifted over towards him, bumping Ilya with his hip.

"Fuck, man," Marly said. "I didn't mean to hit him that hard."

That jolted Ilya out of his shock, at least. If he hadn't been too shaky and nauseous to fight, he thought he might have decked his own A then and there. He was honestly surprised that no Montreal players had tried to start a fight after such a brutal hit on their C, but as he looked around, he took in their grave faces and the sudden hushed silence of the arena, interrupted only by intermittent applause from the crowd as Shane was carried off the ice. No one was happy to see a hit this serious, except the worst of the worst hockey fans who cheered for life-changing, career-altering injuries with vicious glee.

Hollander was still shouting in the bond, louder than he should have been able to project to Ilya as the distance between them increased. Ilya shook his head (bad idea – it only made him dizzier), skated back over to the bench, and tried very, very hard not to throw up.

Chapter 2: Flashback

Chapter Notes

this is just a canon rewrite with soulbond flavoring sprinkled on top. enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Regina, 2008

It started with a handshake in a freezing parking lot in Saskatchewan.

Ilya tended to avoid handshakes. Now that he was traveling to play hockey at an international level, a soulmate would simply be a complication. He was going to be drafted next year, he didn't need to be tied to some woman in ass-nowhere Canada, for instance. But then there was Shane Hollander, polite and Canadian and extending his hand like there was no universe in which Ilya could possibly reject his sportsmanlike gesture.

Handshakes with other players had always been the unavoidable exception; most hockey leagues simply assumed that soulbonds between players were an impossibility, and the glove-free handshakes were seen as a truer gesture of camaraderie. There had been iconic duos who had been so in-sync on the ice that there were rumors that they were bonded, but nothing had ever been publicly confirmed.

Ilya sized Hollander up, then decided that it didn't matter. It wasn't like there was a risk that this boring little Canadian boy was his soulmate anyway.

Or so he thought, until he felt Hollander's palm glide against his, locked eyes with him, and felt something click into place in his chest that he had never known was missing, like a mysterious key had been slotted into a hidden lock in his soul.

"Fuck!" he said, dropping Hollander's hand like it had burned him. He distantly registered the other boy swearing and stepping away from him as well.

His ears were ringing. There was no way that this was happening. He would not be tied to a stupid fucking Canadian for the rest of his life because said stupid fucking Canadian insisted on a handshake when a nod would have done just as well. Maybe he was hallucinating? Except he could already feel the first gentle tendril of awareness extending from his mind to Hollander's. The first impressions of emotions other than his own began to tap at the base of Ilya's skull. The other boy was panicking. Well, no shit.

Ilya pulled out another cigarette from the pack in his jacket pocket and tried to light it, swearing as the lighter still refused to cooperate. Once the cigarette was finally lit, he took a deep drag and closed his eyes, starting to run through the options in his mind. Report bond to authorities, bring Shane Hollander to Russia, end up in a joint shallow grave when his father

kills them both. Report bond, move to Canada, likely die of boredom and lack of access to decent vodka. Not report bond, not tell anyone, still have to live with an annoying Canadian in his head. There was no scenario in which this ended well for either of them.

Ilya opened his eyes to look at Hollander, then blinked. Hollander did not look so good. He was leaning over his knees, breathing fast and thready like he could hardly draw in any oxygen. He was muttering something under his breath, and as he took a step closer, he could hear Hollander repeating, "This isn't happening, this isn't happening, this isn't happening."

Fuck. Maybe that was the only possible answer.

"Okay. Is not happening," Ilya said, and dropped his cigarette butt on the ground to grind it out with his foot.

Hollander didn't seem to hear him, too caught in his own panic. Operating on some deeper instinct, Ilya reached down and cupped a hand around the back of the other boy's neck, gently drawing him upwards. The bond sang with joy at the contact, a long resonant note as the thread between them grew from a thin tendril into a sturdy line of cord.

By the time Ilya managed to pull Hollander upright, he was breathing a little easier. Still rabbit-quick, but less thready. Ilya knew it was his touch that had made the difference, which was a little heady, especially because Hollander's eyes were glassy with tears and his mouth was very, very red from biting his lips.

"What?" Hollander said,

"Is not happening."

"What the fuck do you mean this isn't happening? How can you say that right fucking now? Oh, fuck, this is so fucked up."

Without really knowing why, Ilya planted both hands on each side of Hollander's face, his thumbs digging into the baby fat on his cheeks. "We not tell anyone. Not happening," he said, even as the contact allowed a second tendril of awareness weave its way around the first thread of their bond.

"What? You can't just... do that? Soulbonds have to be registered, like legally, there's all this paperwork, I've seen my parents' cards and stuff but I don't know where you go to get the stuff you have to fill out."

Ilya stared deep into Hollander's eyes, having caught the meaning about half of his babbling. Hollander's cheeks flamed with warmth against Ilya's palms. He should let go, but he didn't. "You want come to Russia?" he asked.

Slowly, with his head still firmly in Ilya's grip, Hollander shook his head no. There was the first discernible burst of emotions beyond panic: determination, fear, disbelief, and a thin tendril of curiosity that Ilya chose to ignore.

"I also not come to Canada. So. We not tell. Not happening," Ilya said, releasing Hollander from his grasp and taking a step backwards. He didn't know how they'd gotten so close.

Shane Hollander, his fucking soulmate, did him a favor and understood him perfectly. Hollander nodded at him slowly, then more decisively. "Okay. You're right. Okay. I'll... I have to. To go," he stammered out.

Hollander offered his hand again, seemingly on instinct, then snatched it back and held it to his chest like he'd touched a hot stove. He stumbled away from Ilya like a baby deer with a single, inscrutable backwards glance over his shoulder.

Ilya pulled out another cigarette and cursed his goddamn life as he felt the tendril of Hollander in the back of his skull dwindle to a single golden thread with increased distance, without ever entirely fading away.

Shane had spent his whole life dreaming of his soulmate. His parents bonded in college, and though they always insisted that he didn't need to find his soulmate in order to have a healthy and fulfilling relationship, he knew that they had always envisioned the same for him. Soulmates were relatively rare, but of course they were the ideal in every romance story every, from, like, the beginning of time.

If you'd asked him to describe his soulmate before today, obviously he would have described a girl. She would have to be interested in hockey, even if she wasn't a player herself, because he didn't know what they would talk about otherwise. Maybe someone a little more outgoing than he was, so that she could steer in social situations and balance out his awkward. The details of appearance didn't matter so much to him, but sometimes he let himself imagine what it would be like to look in the sparkling eyes of someone who already understood him without needing to try. That element of balance and automatic connection had always sounded nice.

Well. Now he knew. At least his soulmate was good at hockey. Although they weren't really soulmates, since they'd decided that it didn't mean anything. Rozanov was strictly a fellow player, and was shaping up to be Shane's greatest competitor for first overall draft pick. Maybe that was all the soulbond meant... they were destined to compete against each other. Or they were destined to circle each other forever, like ships stuck in a whirlpool that were going to crash together and probably sink to the bottom of the ocean forever. That felt about right for this moment.

Shane's hands were still shaking, so he fisted them in the fabric of his pants and hoped that his parents didn't notice anything strange in his voice as he chatted with them from the back seat of the car during their drive home. He felt a sense of swooping, nauseous regret, like he'd just gotten off one-too-many rounds on a rollercoaster.

"Oh, you talked to Ilya Rozanov? What's he like?" Yuna asked.

"Kind of a dick," Shane answered, and ignored the way his head pounded as the faint thread of his connection to Rozanov stretched thinner and thinner.

Los Angeles, 2009

Ilya mostly succeeded in not thinking about Shane Hollander. The thin tendril connecting them in the back of his mind never fully went away, but the distance meant that no information came through the bond other than the very fact of its existence.

In the months since their fateful meeting, he had suffered more headaches than usual. Sometimes he felt a dull ache in the pit of his stomach even when he'd eaten his fill, as if he had been awake too long and his whole body was confused. Then again, dealing with Alexei and his father and stepmother would give almost anyone headaches and a sick feeling in their stomach.

By the time the draft rolled around, he was adjusting to sleeping a little worse on nights when the ache in his stomach wouldn't go away. His father called him lazy on the days he laid in bed, missing something that he wouldn't name, and he tried not to think about the days when his mother couldn't get out of bed. It was all stupid anyway. All the beautiful women who would be falling over him as soon as he was named the number one overall draft pick, and his stupid fucking body wanted him to go, what? Cuddle? With a prickly, stiff, stick-up-his-ass Canadian? Ridiculous. Ilya knew better than his body, and he knew what he wanted. Shane Hollander had nothing to do with it.

When Boston did name him their number one draft pick and emerged with a jersey bearing his name, Ilya nearly tripped getting out of his seat to climb onstage at the surge of black misery from Hollander's end of the bond. When Hollander was called to the stage as Montreal's number two pick, Ilya could feel a brief burst of joy, but it was still weighed down with misery that seemed more appropriate at a funeral than for someone who had just been drafted to an excellent professional hockey team as the second overall pick. It only made Ilya smile wider as he and Hollander stood shoulder-to-shoulder in their staged photo op, the closest they'd been since that day in the parking lot.

That night, Ilya told himself that it was an aching head that prevented him from sleeping. But with Hollander, for once, within the same country, even staying within the same building, the bond was no longer strained with distance. Truth be told, he had felt the tension ease almost as soon as he walked into the lobby. Still, it had been an exciting day, and he was a little restless. Going to the location where he somehow knew that he would find Hollander was absolutely not his intention.

As they slumped to the ground in the hotel gym after pushing themselves far too hard on the exercise bikes, Ilya allowed himself to pay proper attention to the bond for the first time since that fateful handshake. It still felt thin, like a few golden threads plaited into a slim, but sturdy line between them. He imagined pinching the cord, starving the connection, and then imagined releasing his fingers.

Hollander was studying him, breathing hard. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Ilya shrugged, and insistently passed his water bottle to Hollander. As their fingers brushed, Ilya visualized grabbing the bond and tugging gently. Hollander jerked back, staring at him

intently. His little tug allowed him a brief burst of particularly intense insight into Hollander's end of the bond, and he was... perhaps unsurprised to find a simmering undercurrent of arousal, curiosity, and the constant thread of panic that always seemed to run through Hollander's mind.

"Fuck off," Hollander said. He could probably feel Ilya's smugness radiating from his end of their connection.

"Fuck off for... give you water? Is not very nice."

"We're not doing this. You said it. So fuck off."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Okay, that's it. I'm going to bed," Hollander said, and got up to leave.

Ilya stared at Shane Hollander's ass as he walked out of the hotel gym. There was frustration in the bond now, yes, but the overwhelming emotional tone of the evening had been arousal. Hollander might be an uptight Canadian, but he was an uptight Canadian who was apparently harboring some gay sexual fantasies and who didn't seem to want to get away from Ilya, even if, by all accounts, they were about as compatible as a cactus and a glacier.

For the first time, Ilya considered that perhaps this would be fun. He grinned to himself, swinging the empty water bottle in his fingers, and tugged on the bond one more time, just to hear Hollander swear in the hallway.

Shane spent the weeks after the draft researching bonds on his phone and jumping every time his parents passed behind him on the couch in the living room. He was always a little jumpy, but this time it was bad enough that his dad was starting to tease him about all the big secrets Shane must be keeping. Shane forced a smile at those jokes and tried not to sweat.

He would be moving into his new Montreal condo soon, purchased with a down payment pulled from his initial sponsorship deals and signing bonus, but for now, he was living in his childhood bedroom while the contractors and decorator finished their work. He sat on his blue childhood bedspread, staring at the hockey posters on the wall, and tried to find the bond so he could complete the bond control exercises he had found on the internet.

Where was his bond? He had never really thought about that question before. Youtube had said that the most common place to feel the connection was from the base of the skull, where the most primordial parts of the hindbrain were located. He tried to visualize it. He briefly imagined himself as a dog on a leash and made a face. No, not a leash, but there it was sure enough. It was like an electrical cord attached to the back of his skull and stretching through the door of his bedroom off into the far distance. The length of the cord, at the moment, meant that barely any electricity was flowing, but he felt a brief spark of acknowledgment after a few minutes. Rozanov was still there on the other end, at least.

Shane flopped back on his bed with a headache. He would have to get better at this. There was no way he would be able to focus on the ice against Rozanov, if the other man could do things like tug on his bond and project the kinds of emotions that he had been experiencing in the hotel gym. The memory of Rozanov's arousal and interest sent a shiver down the back of his spine, and Shane covered his hands with his face.

Having a soulmate sucked. He didn't know why he'd ever wanted this.

He took a deep breath, and tried visualizing unplugging the electrical cord from the back of his neck. For his troubles, he got a painful shock that radiating all the way down his spine, which was perhaps fair. The point wasn't to get rid of the bond, although the internet had also said that was a possibility with medical assistance and enough conviction to repudiate the bond. Another painful shock radiated over his scalp at the thought of totally removing the cord from his head.

He didn't want that, he didn't think. It would certainly make everything simpler. Just... what if it messed with his hockey? What if there were complications? What if he was so desperate to get rid of Rozanov that he, like, lobotomized himself? What if they *died*, and then everyone found out? Oh god, that would be so embarrassing, even if Shane was dead. He would just know, somehow. No, breaking the bond just wasn't worth it. It didn't mean anything anyway, so it was better to just let it be.

Okay, so not unplugging. He considered a moment. Maybe there was a light switch on the outlet, like the outlet in his room that was designed to have a lamp plugged into it. The potential for that electric connection remained there, but it was temporarily shut off.

Using visualization techniques perfected from years of watching tape and walking himself mentally through hockey plays, he pictured the light switch on his wall. On, off. On, off. The bond lit up in waves, like he was sending pulses of morse code through to Rozanov, wherever in the world he was currently.

Shane took a deep breath. Like anything, all it took was hard work and dedication, and there was no one better qualified. He could control this, and he would.

Toronto, 2010

By the next time they saw each other off the ice, Ilya could feel that there was something different in the bond. Knowing Hollander, he had researched and practiced until he could control his side of the bond better. It was hard not to be a little disappointed, although Hollander's control wasn't perfect yet, and with such unusually close proximity, he thought he might still be getting a little more than the other man intended.

That curiosity and arousal were still there at their CCM shoot, even when Hollander tried to lie to him. It was a cute attempt, especially because Ilya was in his head, even when Hollander was attempting to keep a tight lock on the bond. He generously did not bring up the fact that it was stupid for Hollander to try and lie to his soulmate, because he was a kind and generous person, not at all because the idea of acknowledging the bond out loud made

him want to break out in hives. This could be fun and sexy without being more. He was very good at that.

“This is such a bad idea,” Hollander said later, as Ilya pushed him against the wall in his hotel room. He wasn’t fooled. Hollander was radiating pure want, and it only made Ilya harder.

“Why?” Ilya asked. “We already have secret.”

Hollander looked at him with dark, uncertain eyes, and perhaps Ilya should have known Hollander was right and this was a bad idea, but his chest felt like it was radiating light for the first time in months, and Hollander’s desire for him would always drive him to make bad decisions. He pressed closer, and let himself want.

After his first few years in the NHL, Shane felt very confident in his ability to control the bond. He didn’t think that Rozanov was as dedicated to practicing his control, because whenever they were together, Shane felt the bright pulses of his emotions washing against the base of his skull. When they were playing, the emotions were familiar, mirrors of his own feelings anytime he was on the ice. When they were fucking, the emotions were also usually pretty simple and mutually shared. If neither of those things were true, though, the wash of emotions coming through the bond from Rozanov didn’t make any goddamn sense.

In Sochi, Rozanov’s head had felt like a bruise, black and blue and swollen. He had snapped at Shane, and there had been simultaneous pulses of anger and regret in the bond. Underneath it all, there was an emotion that felt... green, maybe. A little sickly like jealousy, but the image that came to mind was more of a growing thing in an unlikely place, like moss on the side of damp stone in the dark forest. That was the only way that Shane could describe it, but he didn’t know what the fuck it meant.

Texting was safer. It was probably a bad idea, but then again, everything they did was a bad idea. It was the only way that he felt like he could get to know Rozanov without having to parse through whatever bullshit was coming through the bond. And to his chagrin, Rozanov over text was funny and sharp, even in his second language. Shane spoke French just fine, but he wasn’t *funny* in French. Or in English, according to Rozanov.

For all intents and purposes, the bond didn’t exist, either legally or in their everyday lives. Except Shane was starting to get headaches more and more frequently, to the point that he knew his parents were concerned. Whenever they called, even if he had been laying on his couch for an hour with a migraine and an arm thrown over his eyes to block out the light, he stopped mentioning that his head hurt. Sometimes he thought he played better in games against Boston out of sheer relief.

They never talked about the bond, even when they were together. The closest they got was in the bathroom in Vegas, after the clown show of their awards presentation.

Shane didn’t know what made him finally snap. Maybe it was the ghosting after Sochi. Maybe it was the fact that he’d had a pounding headache all day, right until Rozanov wrapped a hand around the back of his neck on stage in front of all of their peers, and the

instant bliss inside his head made him so mad that he nearly decked Rozanov right then and there.

He'd staggered off to the bathroom to try to regather some calm, and there was Rozanov, the burr in his fucking side. Maybe the bond was Rozanov's fault, because he could never leave Shane well enough alone. Of course Rozanov started goading him about sucking his dick, because this was nothing more than sex for him. He wasn't sure what fucking emotions Rozanov was feeling, but it sure felt like at least part of Rozanov was laughing at him, and Shane had enough.

"Fuck you, you are unbelievable," he snapped back, breathing hard. "I am getting headaches all the fucking time! I'm lying to my parents because of you. Fuck. I don't even know why I'm talking to you right now."

At the allusion to the bond, the crooked smirk dropped off Rozanov's face. He stepped closer and opened his side of the bond a little more, pushing through waves of apology (and a little bit of arousal, still, which should have cheapened the apology but somehow didn't). Shane was so tired. He let his head drop down to Rozanov's shoulder, and squeezed his eyes shut tight at the way the bond sang between them.

Shane flipped his mental light switch, allowing his side of the bond to flicker to life. He didn't know why. He recognized that green feeling from Rozanov's side of the bond again. It still felt a little sickly, like Rozanov was ashamed of feeling it, but he didn't think it was jealousy. That didn't make any sense in the year that Rozanov had won the cup and was definitely going to win MVP. But it was definitely the same feeling, except it had grown, like it was the moss on the rock and also a couple of mushrooms. He didn't know how that could be an emotion, but somehow it was. Fucking Russians. Fucking *Rozanov*.

Later, he went gone to Rozanov's penthouse hoping for... he didn't know what. Clearly it was a mistake. Rozanov had kept the bond entirely closed, and as he settled himself in a chair to watch Shane, Shane wondered if it was Rozanov's intention to maintain enough distance between them to keep the bond shut during their entire encounter. He disliked the thought, even as he shivered under Ilya's commands.

When Rozanov finally came to him and the bond went flying open as they touched, Shane was caught off guard by the level of hatred and want mixing within the bond. Rozanov fucked him without kissing him and immediately slammed the bond closed again as soon as he had tied off the condom, kicking him out of the hotel room and leaving him cold in the elevator, with the empty space where the bond should be already starting to ache with another incoming headache.

So, yeah. Shane didn't know what to do with any of that. But he was pretty sure that they were bad at being soulmates, and it seemed like Rozanov hated him at least a little bit. This whole thing felt like a grand cosmic joke.

It probably had been a mistake not to break the bond as soon as it formed, but in order to do that, they would have had to tell somebody about the bond's existence in the first place. His parents would have had to help them access a bond clinic, and they would have looked at him like he was a sad puppy with an unfortunate skin condition. Medical privacy laws existed, but

there was no way he wanted that fact written on any piece of paper. No one could know, so no one would. Shane would be fine, even if Rozanov never kissed him again.

Of course Ilya was glad that Shane had learned how to control the bond. He was sure that Hollander had worked hard at it, to claw back his all-important sense of control. It was important for both of them to have their privacy. Even during games, during sex, he thought that Hollander managed to keep some semblance of control over the bond in a way that Ilya never did, which gave him a queasy sense of vulnerability. Still, he got the picture. The important things came through.

When Ilya was fucking him, there was desire and satisfaction. Hollander loved it, and Ilya loved knowing that he loved it. When they were playing against each other, determination and concentration. This was simple. Hollander loved what he could do on the ice and in bed. There was nothing more in the bond that Ilya could detect, no hint of the greater feelings that Ilya was beginning to nurse like a bleeding ulcer in his stomach. Whenever they were apart, he ached all the time.

Sometimes, there were other emotions. In Boston, when Ilya gasped out Shane's name during sex, there was pure, blind panic from Shane's end of the bond as he ran away. In the club in Montreal, Ilya could feel nothing at all from Hollander, even when he opened the side of the bond to project *don't care, don't care, don't care*.

The bond was still useful, even when Ilya was not finding what he wanted within it. He was grateful when their connection allowed him to find Shane on the beach in Tampa. Hollander was keeping his side of the bond more open than usual, and as Ilya sat down beside him, he let Shane's emotions wash over him. Exhaustion. A kind of melancholy contentment that seemed appropriate for someone sitting on the beach at sunset, staring at the ocean. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Found you," he said, and tugged on the bond a little bit. Instead of making him jerk and swear, it made Shane smile.

"You were looking for me?"

"Of course not. Do not need to look. Can always find."

There was something new in Shane's side of the bond, a gentle, blooming openness that Ilya wanted to sink into and float in, like a warm tide pool on a sunny day. He dug his toes into the sand and resisted the urge to flop his head onto Hollander's shoulder. He wanted to sink into him, push him down onto the sand and wrap his arms around him. He wanted them to melt together and open their bond all the way, stay there forever and never let go. But whatever the openness was, it wasn't love. Ilya would have been able to feel it by now, if there was love there.

Later, in the hotel room, that openness remained even when Ilya turned snappy and yelled. Ilya winced as soon as he raised his voice, feeling Hollander flinch in his own head.

“I don’t think I can keep pretending I don’t like you anymore,” Shane said, and for the first time that Ilya could remember, Shane deliberately pushed feelings through the bond towards Ilya. *Trust. Desire. Affection.*

“You don’t like me,” he said, trying to avoid what was currently coming through the bond and stick with what he knew to be true. He briefly wondered what Shane could read from his side of the bond, and swallowed around a lump in his throat. He should probably have dedicated more time to working on his own control.

“Yeah, I do. I think I like you a little too much,” Shane replied, and there came the *trust, desire, affection*, again, warm and floating. Ilya’s stomach ached even though the proximity should prevent the bond sickness. The feelings that Shane was sharing were more than he’d ever thought he would get, and just far enough away from what he wanted to be unbearable. Still, there was more depth of feeling from Hollander’s side of the bond that Ilya had ever suspected, and when Shane held him as he cried, it felt like his mind and body were both enveloped in the steady warmth of an electric blanket. It made his entire body tingle.

It was too much. It was all too much, and an impossible situation. Whenever they were together, with sparks dancing along the rope of their bond, Ilya wanted nothing else in the world. When they parted, and the bond dwindled down to a single thread of connection, he remembered all the reasons that this was impossible, with a clear head.

The only thing to do was to stop sleeping together. The bond that had felt like a thin cord had grown, almost without Ilya realizing it, until it felt like a thick and sturdy rope that would be satisfying to grasp in his hand, if it had a physical manifestation. He didn’t know if you could still break a bond that strong. He suspected it would be very difficult and traumatizing, like removing half of his own brain. But bonded or not, strong or not, they could stop... everything else. Sleeping together, spending time together. Maybe, unnourished, the bond would shrivel back to something small and insignificant, a little thread between them that wouldn’t terrify Ilya quite so much.

Chapter End Notes

I heard a rumor that people who leave comments on ao3 are the sexiest people in the whole world, did anyone else hear that? just me?

Chapter 3: The Hospital

Chapter Notes

and here we diverge from canon! Loopy Shane, I love you.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Montreal, April 2017

Ilya strode into the hospital and walked up to the check-in-desk so quickly that he startled the woman sitting there behind her glass barrier. She looked up at him, shocked. He wasn't sure what he looked like, but it probably wasn't an encouraging start, since he would definitely need to talk his way into Shane Hollander's hospital room.

"Hello, how can I help you?"

Ideally she could knock him out with the stapler on her desk so he wouldn't have to experience Shane Hollander screaming his pain and fear directly into Ilya's head. It should be impossible to broadcast across distances that far, but Hollander had always been an overachiever. Usually that was annoying, but at the current moment, it was agonizing.

"Here to visit," he said through clenched teeth that he hoped looked like a smile.

"Visiting hours are over for today, I'm sorry."

Ilya winced. He had wanted to rush right out of the arena, but of course that would be suspicious, so he'd endured questions from the media, and showered, and gotten dressed with his team while trying very hard not to throw up all over his stall. Starbursts of intensified pain struck at random moments, and he'd thrown his gear into his stall even more haphazardly than usual so he didn't drop it on the ground. If his team had noticed that he was quiet, hopefully they had chalked it up to captainly anger at Marlow over the hit.

So it was late by the time he got to the hospital. It didn't matter. He would wait here all night if he had to, but somebody would definitely be cleaning up the waiting room. He was either going to vomit or explode if he had to sit through much longer, which, incidentally, matched the kind of full-body panic that Hollander projected into the bond far too frequently. Ilya almost missed Hollander's usual brand of anxiety. He would take anything over incendiary pain that nearly blotted out his vision at the worst moments.

"Is.... special case," he tried, steadying himself on the desk.

"What kind of special case? Next-of-kin, patient in critical condition?"

Shit. He had spent the drive over trying to figure out how to explain this, and hadn't come up with anything other than telling the truth. "No, is... is bond."

"If that's the case, then I'll need to see your paperwork."

"Paperwork?"

"From the relevant international bond authorities."

"Don't have with me," Ilya said, which wasn't technically a lie. He couldn't have papers with him if the papers didn't exist.

"Then I can't give you any patient information."

"Look. I can feel that something is very wrong. I need to be there."

She sighed and squinted at him. He couldn't tell if she recognized him or not. He hoped not.

"I can tell that you mean that," she said. "But I can't lose my job by giving out privileged patient information to people without the proper paperwork, no matter how convincing they are."

Well, fuck it. Ilya dropped what little composure he had been able to gather and decided to beg. "Please. Please. I need to go in, I need to help. If he doesn't want, or doesn't need, then I will go. I promise. No problem, no fuss."

She looked genuinely sympathetic at this point. Ilya could feel that he was sweating. His hair was still wet from his shower after the game. He probably looked desperate.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said. "It's hospital policy."

Ilya sighed. This was taking too long. "Fine. Fine. I go. Where is bathroom?"

She looked at him, clearly realizing what he was trying to do, but it was late and the hospital was nearly empty. The other nurse in the check-in area was occupied with something on his phone, and the security guard in the corner seemed to be dozing.

He plastered on the best charming smile he could muster with the pounding in his head. "Just need to pee," he said.

She sighed, then pointed down the hallway past her desk. "I can't give you any room numbers," she warned. "And if the nurses see you on the floor without a visitor badge, I'm not responsible. Don't make me regret this."

Ilya walked down the hallway to the bathroom, then quickly turned left into an exit stairway and started walking. He didn't need her directions to find Shane Hollander.

Yuna Hollander considered herself a pretty unflappable person. She was a daughter of immigrants and a hockey mom, and both of those traits had instilled in her a calm resiliency in almost any situation. She could translate, and bargain, and negotiate, and fight if she needed to fight for her family, for the things she believed in.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sight of her son laid out unmoving on the ice after a brutal hit. He'd gotten hurt before, but never like this. She'd stood with a hand over her mouth, watching as the medics lifted her baby boy onto the spinal board and carried him off the ice, and felt frozen. David, bless him, had gotten them moving, taking the initiative to hustle them back into the team areas, showing access passes and trying to see if they could follow behind the ambulance in their car. He also pushed steady reassurance through their bond, which she mirrored back to him as best she could.

It had been one of the worst things she had ever seen in her life. Still, the hit itself wasn't particularly surprising. Ever since she strapped Shane's first pair of skates onto his tiny feet, she had been worried about the possibility of a devastating injury like this. Now all her worst nightmares were coming true, as she sat by Shane's bed, holding his hand and hoping that it would give him some comfort.

She was shaken. She was also deeply afraid. Shane seemed to get worse the further they got from the rink. The trainers told them he had been semi-lucid by the time he was loaded into the ambulance, but he had a seizure in the ambulance just before they pulled into the hospital. Now he was asleep, but restless. His temperature was rising, his heartbeat fast, and the doctors were warning them to brace for a severe concussion, perhaps a career-ending one. They didn't have any explanation for the sudden turn for the worse, saying things about *monitoring* and *risk factors* and *head injuries being difficult to predict*.

It was shocking. It was her worst nightmare. But it wasn't surprising, despite it all.

What *was* surprising was the sight of Ilya Rozanov, the captain of the team that had just badly injured her son, barging through the door of Shane's hospital room as if he had any right to be there. From the second he walked through the door, he didn't have eyes on anyone but her son. She felt a flare of anger. She knew they were rivals, but at this hour of the night, he must be here to... what, gloat? Confirm that his greatest rival was out for the season? Finish the fucking job?

She stood up, placing herself between her son and Rozanov, despite the absurdity of their height difference. She said something cutting about his nerve coming here, and visiting hours starting tomorrow. He didn't seem to see her. As if in a trance, he walked past her, gently moving her to the side with the full conviction of a hockey captain, not to be denied. She let herself be moved because the gentleness of the motion surprised her, more than anything else.

"Hey!" David said, standing up from his chair at the foot of the bed as Rozanov stepped closer to their son. But Rozanov simply reached out a hand and placed it on the side of Shane's face with more tender care than Yuna would have ever thought possible from such a large and obnoxious man.

As soon as Rozanov's hand made contact with his face, Shane stilled in his restless sleep. David and Yuna both watched, with dropped jaws, as their son's heartrate monitor dropped

back down into a more acceptable resting range for a professional athlete. His body fully relaxed into the hospital bed below him, and even in his sleep, he let out a little sigh, pressing even further into Rozanov's touch.

"What..."

Rozanov turned to look at her with guilt in his hazel eyes. His face was startlingly open and gentle. She was used to his cocky grin from tv interviews and the ice, so it was strange to see him so openly stricken. It made him look far younger, and she remembered all of a sudden from her investigation of Rozanov during the leadup to the draft that he was a few months younger yet than Shane.

"I'm sorry," Rozanov said, and *that* was another kick in the teeth. "Sorry I come here like this."

He turned towards Shane. His large hand was resting on Shane's pale, sweaty cheek, and his thumb was tenderly stroking along Shane's brow bone, seemingly without realizing. It was the kind of instinctive gesture that only came with years of intimate affection. Yuna felt the bottom of her stomach drop out. They knew Shane so well, or so she had thought. How on earth had they missed something as important as this?

"I can feel that he need," Rozanov continued.

"What do you mean, you could feel?" David asked. "What did he need?"

Yuna already knew, but she had to ask anyway. "Are you saying..."

Rozanov nodded. "We are bonded."

Taking a stumbling step backwards, Yuna sank down into her chair. David reached out to steady her, both with a hand on her leg and through their own bond.

"Sorry," Rozanov said again. "Sorry you find out like this. I-"

Yuna was at a loss for words, still staring at Rozanov's gentle hand. He hadn't stopped stroking Shane's brow. Worse, Rozanov looked like he was about to cry, struggling for words. Despite herself, she felt a flare of protective maternal instinct. Whatever this was, and whoever had the idea to keep it hidden, it was clear that Rozanov shared her own emotions about seeing Shane in a hospital bed. Maybe that was enough, for now.

"Well," David said into the moment of silence as Rozanov tried to gather himself, and Yuna could feel her husband mustering every ounce of diplomacy in his deeply Canadian body.

"Thank you for being here to help our son. It seems like we have a lot of catching up to do."

Yuna Hollander was shorter than Ilya remembered, and he was trying very hard not to think about the fact that he was officially meeting Shane's parents for the first time as he stepped into the hospital room.

Ilya didn't know how to explain his presence, especially with the neon flares of pain stabbing at his skull through the bond. It felt like miniature fireworks exploding in random patterns across his head. If this was what he was getting through the bond, he couldn't imagine what Shane would be feeling if he was fully conscious.

"Ilya Rozanov," Yuna said, stepping in front of him to block his way to Shane. "After the stunt that your teammate pulled, you have a lot of nerve barging in here like this. Visiting hours start tomorrow at 9 am if you want to pay your respects." There was a vicious bite to the way she articulated *pay your respects*, and Ilya wished he could find the right words. This was probably not a particularly great first impression.

Ilya didn't know how to explain, but he knew in his bones that Shane needed him, that his presence and his touch would help. He stepped forward into the room and pushed past Shane's mother as gently as he could, given the difference in their heights, trying his best to telegraph his movements. She blessedly let him move her to the side, probably still caught by surprise. Small mercies. He didn't think that Shane would ever forgive him for fighting his mother, even if it was to get closer to him.

He heard a sharp objection from Shane's father, but as terrified as he was of the impression he was making on Shane's parents, they didn't matter right now. Shane was *right there*, and there wasn't anything he could do other than reach up and put a hand to Shane's pale, sweaty face.

The relief was instantaneous. He hadn't realized how badly his head had been throbbing, how his stomach had been cramping, until suddenly the sensation was gone. Shane shifted under his touch, a ghost of a smile flickering across his face, and seemed to fully relax into the bed for the first time since Ilya had stepped into the room. Fuck, Ilya was so screwed. How had they ever thought that they could keep this casual?

Remembering their audience, Ilya looked up nervously at Shane's parents, who were watching him with a mix of incredulity and suspicion.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Sorry I come here like this."

He would have to explain. Shane would hate it, but there was no other way around it; Hollander's parents deserved to know why a strange man was holding their son's face in his hospital bed, and, worse, why it seemed to be helping. He stroked a finger across Shane's brow, hopefully comforting both of them even if Shane remained unconscious. He steeled himself like he was about to take a face-off and tried to find the words to explain.

He told them about the bond, and watched the news hit them like a physical blow. He apologized again for barging into the room. Tried to think of what else to say and the English words with which to say it, but there was a lump rising in his throat and his mind was blurring. He turned his head back towards Shane, trying to ignore the heavy gazes of Shane's parents on the back of his neck. But of course Shane's parents were as polite and Canadian as he was, so when Shane's dad – David, Ilya couldn't pretend that he didn't know his name – when David offered a sentence that sounded like permission to explain later, Ilya nodded and let the conversation rest.

They lapsed into a tense silence, and Ilya occupied himself with stroking Shane's face, pushing reassurance through the bond and trying to swallow down relief and gratitude and an endless well of worry.

Shane blinked. His eyelids felt very heavy and his body felt floaty. He blinked again. That was the ceiling. It was blurry. Maybe he needed his glasses? But that didn't make sense, he only needed his glasses when he was reading. He wasn't trying to read the ceiling. That was funny. He giggled a little bit to himself, which hurt.

He blinked again with eyelids that still felt lead-lined. His bond was open. He didn't remember how to turn it off, couldn't find the light switch in the dark. But there was something coming through it, a blur of emotions that felt yellow and pink and green. Maybe like worry, but also like other stuff. That didn't make sense. He wasn't worried about anything, really, for once in his life. Unless... that wasn't his worry.

He turned his head to the left, which felt weird even though it didn't hurt at all. Ilya was sitting right there. Oh, good. That was good. Shane was so happy to see him. "Heyyyy," he said.

Ilya had been staring down at their joined hands – their joined hands!! They were holding hands!! – but with a word from Shane, his head snapped up and their eyes met. Shane smiled at him. He looked very tired and very handsome. His hair was very curly, like it had air dried after a shower. It was cute.

"Hi," Ilya said back, and in the bond, the green thing was blooming like verdant ferns on a forest floor.

"Hey, kiddo," came his dad's voice. Shane frowned. That didn't make any sense.

Shane turned his head to look at his parents, then blinked hard when the movement made him see double. Oh, nope. He had two parents, not four. There they were. He turned his head to look back at Ilya, and felt that the bond had gone pink with worry. He was worried too, now. This was bad. This was... not good. Bad. Ouch.

"Oh, fuck," he said.

"I'm sorry," Ilya said, and there was more worry in the bond, sharp like a... sharp thing. Shane felt an ache in the base of his stomach. Also in his chest. Also in his head. Also everywhere else. He squeezed Ilya's hand, which hurt, but also made him feel better.

"Oh, fuuuck," he said again. It seemed like the only thing that really made sense to say in this situation.

"Shane, honey," came his mom's voice, a little shaky. "Something you want to tell us?"

Shane shook his head. Nope. He didn't want to tell anybody anything. Maybe his parents hadn't noticed that they were holding hands. Or that Ilya was here. He tried to pull his hand

away from Ilya's grasp, but Ilya held fast. That was probably for the best. Shane didn't really want to let go of his hand anyway, not now, and probably not ever. It would make playing hockey difficult, but they could make it work, because they were the best.

"Shh," Ilya said, and now his thumb was running over the back of Shane's hand. That was nice. *Ilya* was nice. Shane was glad he had stopped pretending otherwise. "You are, what is the phrase? High as kite. We are okay for now. You can sleep."

Shane nodded, and pushed everything he was feeling through the bond at Ilya, which made the other man gasp at the rush of information. What was Shane feeling? He didn't know. Ilya could probably sort it out. Shane had never been very good at that anyway.

He distantly noted the nurse coming in to check on him, but Shane went back to sleep, which was probably rude. He couldn't help it, so maybe no one would be mad at him.

They all slept in fits and starts. Ilya thought it was a little unusual that they were allowed to stay overnight, but it did sound like Shane had been in fairly critical condition when he first arrived in the hospital. Plus, Yuna and David were helpful and polite with the nurses whenever they came in to check on Shane and briefly wake him. Each nurse shot curious glances in Ilya's direction, but it was clear that he had Yuna and David's permission to be here, so no one objected to his presence. Ilya mostly tried to stay out of the way, while also staying as close to Shane as possible. Even stepping to the other side of the room made his head start to ache.

Ilya woke up bleary-eyed in the early-morning sunlight coming through the hospital window and the scent of black tea filling the hospital room. He sat up, stretched, and winced at the feeling of hospital sheets creased into his face. He ran his hands through his hair, which had been mostly flattened on the side that was pressed against the mattress, and surreptitiously wiped a line of drool off on his chin. Fuck, did his neck and shoulders hurt.

Without comment, David reached out to set a cup of black tea on the small side table next to Ilya, which Ilya immediately grabbed and clutched in his hands, letting the steam rise in his face to wake him up a little. Shane was still asleep, which was good: sleep was the most important thing, now that the medical staff seemed less concerned about the severity of his concussion and he was resting easily.

Hollander's parents let him sip his tea and wake up a little, which was very nice of them, although he could still feel their eyes on the side of his head. The tea was nicer than he'd expected for a hospital, and even sweetened with a little bit of honey. He wondered how long Shane's parents had been awake.

"Feel a little more alive?" David asked gently, once he was about three-quarters of the way through his tea. He supposed he did, although his teeth felt gross and his face was greasy. He really was making the worst first impression possible with Shane's parents.

"Never slept better," he said, "This is very expensive hotel room. Or maybe not, is Canada, not America, yes?" The joke, weak as it was, got a slight chuckle from David.

Shane made an indistinct noise in his sleep, and Ilya reached out to put a hand on his leg. Ilya, Yuna, and David all studied Shane for a moment, watching the easy rise and fall of his chest with a shared sense of quiet relief.

“How long has it been?” came Yuna’s voice. “I was trying to remember when you first met. It would have been World Juniors 2008, is that right?”

“Right.”

“So did it happen then, or...?”

Ilya shook his head. This was not his to share. “I should give him the chance to explain.”

David smiled. “With the painkillers, I’m not sure he’ll feel up to explaining anytime soon. You don’t have to tell us anything you don’t want to, of course.”

Ilya did want to. If he was honest, he had been dying to talk to someone about this situation for a very long time. But Ilya had already taken choices away from Shane that evening, even though he couldn’t regret it. Shane deserved to have the support of his parents on his own terms. Ilya should probably call Svetlana, now that he was thinking about it. She would yell at him and tell him he was being stupid, but she might also know what to do.

“Is complicated,” he said, briefly meeting their eyes and then deciding that watching Shane’s chest rise and fall was much easier and less intimidating. He took Shane’s hand again, more for his own comfort than for Shane’s.

“I can imagine,” David said, still gentle.

Ilya shook his head, feeling fresh tears gathering in his eyes and desperately trying to choke them down. God, he was pathetic. “We decide right away not to tell anyone. It makes things complicated for me with family, with Russia. You know. But also with playing, for both of us,” he said. “Probably was stupid to think we can get away with it. And then we don’t stay away from each other. Can’t, maybe. Like, uh... like planets, you know? Circling. There is... pull.”

Yuna nodded. Of course they knew. They had been bonded for a very long time.

Ilya shook his head, wishing he could remember the word for *orbiting* in English. He thought he had been clear enough. “Sorry,” he said. “Is hard to explain. He will do it better.”

“No, that made sense,” Yuna said. “So you’ve been seeing each other. Are you... boyfriends, then?”

The million-dollar question, as the Americans would say. Ilya thought of the sheer wave of *love, need, gratitude, longing, desire, love, love, love*, that Shane had pushed towards him earlier, when the painkillers had lowered his inhibitions. In that moment, he could have laid down to sleep for a thousand years, even in the stiff, uncomfortable hospital bed, as long as Shane would keep feeling like that while he held his hand.

“I don’t know,” he said, although he hated not to give her a better answer. “Maybe, yes. I think we both want, but, you know. Situation is difficult.”

“Okay,” she said. Fuck, they were being kinder to him than he deserved.

He turned away from Shane, looked towards Yuna, and forced himself to make eye contact with her. He couldn’t tell her anything about how he felt, about how Shane felt, but he could tell her this. “I promise that I will not leave him, as long as he needs me.”

Yuna looked a little taken aback by the intensity of his expression, but recovered quickly, and offered him a small smile and a tired nod. “Well,” she said. “We can’t ask for more than that.”

Ilya smiled back, and allowed himself to hope against hope.

Later in the morning, the doctor who came around to explain things to them was a young and polished-looking woman who introduced herself as Dr. Khan. Given the circumstances, Ilya had claimed the place by Shane’s bed and was trying to keep a hand on him at all times. Holding hands felt uncomfortably possessive, especially in front of a random doctor, but he kept a hand resting on the bed next to Shane’s leg through the white hospital bedspread and hoped that the proximity would still help.

Shane was a little more lucid in the morning, even though he was still a little loopy with painkillers. He was also pushing emotions constantly through the wide-open bond in a way that he never had before, and Ilya did his best to sort through what Shane was feeling. He felt a little guilty, because he wasn’t sure if Shane knew he was doing it, but he couldn’t resist the opportunity.

Beyond the surface level pain and drugged-up giddiness, there was something that felt like a vast, electric ocean of feeling, both soothing and invigorating, and all of it directed towards him. With every pulse through the bond, Ilya felt closer and closer to drowning in that love and affection and longing. He wondered how long Shane had been feeling this way—he certainly had kept the bond locked down right, far tighter than Ilya had even realized. It was overwhelming, and a little heady. Part of Ilya wanted the openness to never go away, while the other half of him hoped that it was a side effect of the concussion, because if he had to deal with this much feeling from Shane for the rest of his life, he would drown.

They all turned their attention to the doctor as she walked into the room and came to stand on the other side of Shane’s hospital bed opposite Ilya. As she introduced himself, eyes flicking between the two of them, Ilya felt uncomfortably like someone’s spouse for the first time.

“We were worried about you for a little while there, Mr. Hollander,” Dr. Khan said.

“Sorry,” Shane answered.

“Oh, don’t be. That’s our job.”

Ilya let a smile ghost across his face. *So Canadian.*

The doctor poked at something on her tablet, and continued, “You seem to be feeling significantly better in the presence of Mr. Rozanov. Your heartrate and oxygen stats look better, no more seizures.”

Ilya felt his heart clench. He’d been able to feel that something was wrong, but that sounded much worse than he had imagined.

“I see in your paperwork that we don’t have a bondmate on file, but am I correct in assuming that you two are bonded?” Dr. Khan asked, leveling them a steady look over the top of her tablet.

“Yes,” Shane confirmed, his cheeks flaring red.

“Well, first of all, I want to say that PIPEDA privacy protections extend to bond reporting. Unless there are very specific circumstances in place, like concerns around abuse or coercion, I’m under no obligation to report your bond to the authorities. However, I would strongly encourage you to register your bond in the future. If we’d known that this was a factor, we would have been less concerned about the severity of the concussion and more concerned about getting Mr. Rozanov here as soon as possible.”

“So this is directly related to the bond?” Yuna asked.

“Correct,” she responded. “I won’t pretend this isn’t unusual, but it’s certainly not unheard of. The current theory is that it’s an evolutionary response to injury, especially head injuries. Your brain is registering that something is wrong and sending out constant emergency signals through the bond.”

“Like brain is screaming,” Ilya said.

“Oh, man, is that what it feels like for you?” Shane asked. Ilya ignored him, despite the adorable sing-songy quality that his voice took on when he was loopy with painkillers.

Dr. Khan nodded. “Right. Under normal circumstances, or with a different kind of injury, you might send out a single strong pulse to ask for help, one that would transmit over further distances than normal. But with a concussion, your brain signals are scrambled enough to register a constant state of emergency.”

“So what does that mean?” Yuna asked.

“It means that it will be very difficult for you two to be separated until the concussion heals enough that Mr. Hollander’s brain feels that it can stop sending those emergency signals.”

“Oh, wow,” Shane said. Through the bond, Ilya could feel him start to panic. The bond was open enough that he could even catch a glimpse of his thoughts if he tugged a little. Shane was calculating playoff matchups with the current standings and worrying about how both of their teams would fare without either of them. Typical.

Ilya pulled himself out of Shane’s head and nodded at Dr. Khan, unsurprised. Proximity seemed to be helping Shane so much, and he could already tell that separating would make

them sicker than normal. It only made sense. “So we have to stay together. How long?”

She sighed. “It’s hard to give a definitive timeline. The ability to tolerate distance should improve as the concussion heals, and the brain realizes that the constant emergency signals aren’t necessary. But I would strongly advise against separating for at least a week, ideally more. Head injuries are unpredictable enough without soulbond complications in the mix.”

“Ohh, nope,” Shane said. “Ilya will be in the playoffs. And I can’t be in the playoffs. Because I have a concussion.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Yes, Hollander, we can tell you have concussion.”

Shane turned to glare at him, but with the bruising on his face and his sleepy, blinking eyes, he looked even more than an angry kitten than usual. The bond went to annoyed static as Shane pouted.

“Is okay,” Ilya said. “I have to stay, so I will stay.”

He’d expected that to make Shane happy, but instead he tried to cross his arms over his chest and realized halfway through the gesture that he couldn’t, and it hurt, and looked even grumpier. When he realized he couldn’t cross his arms, Shane tugged on the bond, sharp and clumsy, and Ilya winced.

“It’s the *playoffs*, ” Shane said.

“...yes?” Ilya said.

“Rozanov.”

“*Hollander.* ”

"I keep telling you I am not asshole. You think I leave you here to fry your brain?"

Shane shook his head, then winced. Ilya blinked spots out of his own vision as the pain prickled across the bond. Ilya was going to have to wrap him in bubble wrap, and also probably tie him to the bed. Not even for sex reasons, just so he would stop moving and hurting them both.

"You can't just stay here," Shane said.

Ilya grimaced. "Probably... Bears are not so happy with me after this anyway."

“Why?”

“Because I will tell them about bond.”

“What?”

Ilya was getting annoyed. It wasn’t like he liked this situation much either, even if there was a strange sense of relief at being able to stay and make sure that Hollander was all right. If he

didn't want him there, Shane needed to say that directly, rather than projecting *longing, fear, love* into the bond between them and lying to his face.

"What the fuck else am I going to do, Hollander? I am going to have to miss some games while you recover. I cannot lie and say that I am sick when I was not injured in the game, and I have not seen team doctor. We are probably going to have to register bond anyway after this, you heard, is dangerous if they do not know. So, yes. I have to tell. What the fuck else do you want?"

At that, Shane started projecting *shame, fear, worry*, and fuck, Ilya was doing this wrong. But he despite it all, Shane still had that stubborn look on his face.

"Rozanov. No," he said.

"Hollander. Yes," Ilya countered. It sounded childish, but Shane was being childish about this whole situation.

"*Ilya*, stop it."

"*Shane*. No."

"*Boys*," Yuna said, and both of them looked over at her a little shamefaced. David looked amused, for some reason.

Dr. Khan looked between them as if she were watching a particularly entertaining table tennis match. "Look, I can't pretend that I understand exactly what's going on here. But from a medical perspective, once again, I would highly recommend against separating. I understand that it may be inconvenient with your careers, but the risk to both of your health in the long run is simply too great."

"Yes, we understand," Ilya said sweetly. "Thank you, doctor."

"This isn't over," Shane vowed. But his blinks were becoming longer and heavier once again, his annoyance in the bond going fuzzy with exhaustion. Plus, Ilya had a sneaking suspicion that Shane's parents were on his side, which gave him a pretty significant advantage.

"Anything else we should know?" David asked.

Dr. Khan shook her head. "No, I think that should be it," she said. "Normal concussion protocol, with the addition of bondmate proximity. No screens for a little while and get lots of rest. Obviously no activities that will put strain on the collarbone, and Shane should heal up in a matter of weeks."

"Thank you," Yuna said. "We'll make sure to follow the instructions very carefully."

Ilya tried not to let his smugness radiate too strongly through the bond, but he had never been as good at controlling their connection as Hollander. Checkmate. Yuna was definitely on his side, so that was that.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for all the lovely comments and kudos!! really appreciate it.

Chapter 4: Recovery

Chapter Notes

so. that finale, huh. what if I cried for one thousand years

this is also a cottage episode, but one where they're not quiiiiite in sync yet

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Ilya Rozanov was the absolute last person who Hayden expected to find already sitting in Shane Hollander's hospital room when he came to visit in the morning after the hit. But there he was, and for some reason, he was sitting at Shane's bedside like he belonged there, while Shane's parents sat in chairs at the end of the bed. Everyone looked exhausted.

"What is *he* doing here?" Hayden asked as he knocked on the doorframe and stepped into the room. It was already clear to the entire Voyageurs team that Shane would be out for the season; rather than overwhelm him, they had sent Hayden with their well-wishes. Seems like he wasn't the first to pay his respects, but that didn't explain why Rozanov had made himself comfortable in Shane's hospital room.

David threw up his hands in a *don't ask me* gesture and settled back further in his chair. Yuna leveled a searching look at Rozanov over the top of her glasses and went back to her phone, clearly leaving Shane and Rozanov to explain the situation. Hayden looked at them a little closer, then blinked.

"Are you... are you *holding hands*?"

"Hayd," Shane started, but for the first time in a long time, he looked like the tentative rookie again, uncertain of what to say to his best friend in the whole world.

"We are bonded," Rozanov said, which: what. There was no way that meant what Hayden thought it meant. But it couldn't mean anything else. How in the fuck?

"What?? When??? Just *now*?"

Everyone turned to look incredulously at Hayden, who suddenly remembered that he was an adult who knew how soulbonds tended to work. They had been competing for years at this rate, since their rookie seasons. It was essentially impossible that they had avoided skin-to-skin contact for that many years, especially given the sport they all played.

"No," Shane said slowly. He looked a little out of it, now that Hayden was really studying him. How did Hayden know what Shane sounded like on painkillers, and know that Shane had never tolerated painkillers well and hated the way they made him feel, but he didn't know that Ilya Rozanov was his fucking *soulmate*? No way.

“Has been... a loooooong time. Like forever,” Shane continued, clearly struggling to keep track of timelines in his drugged-up brain.

Okay, that made more sense, but Hayden still didn’t think he deserved quite that level of incredulity. Even if his rational brain knew how you added 1 plus 1 to get 2, that still didn’t mean that this was any less surreal.

“No, no way,” he tried. “This is some kind of prank, right?”

Rozanov bristled. “Why would it be prank?”

“No prank. Fuck, Hayd. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Shane said, talking over the end of Rozanov’s question.

Hayden looked between them, Rozanov looking ready to deck him and Shane with tears glimmering in his Disney-princess-forgive-me eyes. Yeah, okay. If they were fucking with him, there were really committed to the bit. They were still holding hands, for fuck’s sake.

“I just... dude,” Hayden said. “Who are you and what have you done with Shane Hollander?”

“Hayden, it’s me,” he said. “I’m still Shane. Shaaane Hollander.”

For some reason, saying his own name made Shane giggle. Hayden smiled back at him, despite himself. Shane on painkillers was always funny, but he also wasn’t able to give clear answers. Rozanov certainly wasn’t going to be any help. He turned to look at Yuna and David, who were studiously avoiding eye contact and absolutely listening to every word. He wondered if they’d known about Rozanov. With the way they were acting, he kind of thought not.

“Did you tell anybody? Anybody at all?” he asked Shane.

Shane shook his head, the movement a little exaggerated. “Nope,” he said. “Wasn’t serious. Wasn’t real. So I didn’t tell anybody.”

“You’re *soulmates* and it wasn’t anything serious? Shane. Buddy. What does that *mean*?”

“It means what we want it to mean,” Rozanov added, like a dick.

“Fuck off, Rozanov.”

“Swear jar,” Shane added, unhelpfully.

Rozanov sat back in his chair, glaring at him. But then he glanced at Shane, glanced again at Shane’s parents, and deflated a little. Interesting. “We cannot be apart right now,” Rozanov said. “Because of bond. Because of concussion. So we need your help.”

That was a sentence that Hayden had never, not in one million years, thought that he would ever hear coming from Ilya Rozanov’s mouth. Based on how sour Rozanov’s expression was, he’d hated it just as much as Hayden did.

“What do you mean, you can’t be apart?” Hayden asked.

“The doctor called it *emergency signals*, ” Yuna explained, joining the conversation. “Shane’s brain registering a constant state of emergency, which means that he did very poorly without Roz—without *Ilya*, after the concussion. He had a seizure, which we obviously don’t want to happen again.”

“Coach mentioned the seizure. Sounded rough,” Hayden said. “But it was because you were bonded?”

Rozanov nodded, and Shane was looking at him a little lovesick. Oh, this was fucking weird.

Hayden remembered the other part of his mission that morning. “Which, speaking of coach, he asked for updates and mentioned sending someone from the medical staff over to check on you. I’m... kind of assuming you want to keep this under wraps?”

Shane and Rozanov looked at each other for a long moment. With a start, Hayden realized that he recognized that look. It was the kind of look that he and Jackie shared across a crowded room at a party, when he wanted to leave and she wanted him to stay and be polite a little longer. Silent communication. He wondered if they were talking through the bond. Oh, fuck, they had a bond to talk through. What was that like on the ice when they were playing against each other? Had all the board-slamming and chirping been some twisted kind of foreplay? What about *Lily*, for that matter? Lily in... Lily in Boston. Oh, what the fuck. He had so many questions, but the only person who was fully equipped and perhaps willing to answer them was currently flying a mile high on percocet.

“We hoped you might be able to run interference with the team,” Yuna said, and Hayden pulled himself back into the moment. Right. He was being asked for a favor.

“Yes,” Rozanov said. “Keep all Voyageurs away. I will make Hollander better.”

Rolling his eyes, Hayden considered the underlying request while ignoring Rozanov for a moment. He wasn’t sure that he could dissuade the medical staff from checking on their star player, but asking for privacy would probably keep most of the team away. It was clear that Shane’s season was over, anyway. Maybe they could argue that Shane needed rest, not reminders of the hockey he couldn’t play yet? If they didn’t succeed, he didn’t know how they were going to explain Rozanov. Hide him in a closet somewhere? Actually, that wasn’t a bad idea in general.

“Sure,” he said. “I guess. I’ll do my best, anyway.”

“Thanks, Hayd,” Shane said, smiling sunnily at him as if Hayden wasn’t having the weirdest fucking day of his life.

“Yes, yes, thank you, Pike,” Rozanov said, somehow managing to exactly match Shane’s cadence while twisting his words into something mocking.

Hayden left the hospital room feeling like he’d been smacked up the head with a frying pan, and pulled out his phone to make some calls.

By afternoon, Shane was doing so much better that Dr. Khan determined he could be discharged, on the condition that Ilya remained in close proximity while he continued to recover. The nurse who came to talk through the discharge process definitely knew who they were, and Shane winced as she looked between him and Ilya with a speculative gleam in her eye. The percocet was wearing off, and he was starting to settle back into his aching body rather than floating above the whole situation.

His mom was busy walking around the floor with NDAs for the medical staff to sign, as an extra precaution. Shane's agent had drafted the NDA for them – another person who they'd had to bring into this mess of a situation. 24 hours ago, Shane and Ilya had lived in their own little private world, in the moments that they snatched together. Now Hayden knew, and Farah was busy drafting paperwork and multiple versions of statements they could put out in different scenarios, and his parents had started calling the hated Ilya Rozanov by his first name, and some random medical staff at Montreal General were probably speculating about the nature of their relationship. Ilya would need to tell even more people the truth, or part of the truth, in order to excuse himself from an indefinite number of playoff games and stay in Canada to hold his fucking hand. Shane had rarely felt more exposed or pathetic.

In the packet of discharge papers that the nurse had handed to his mom, there was also paperwork for delayed filing of a soulbond. The hospital social worker had been by and tried to talk to them about resources that could assist with delayed filing of bondmate paperwork, and while she was clear that she could not give legal advice, she mentioned things like *same-sex bondmate discrimination* as sufficient grounds to avoid penalties for non-filing of bond status and providing opportunities for asylum applications. The carefully neutral way she looked at them and the gentle, professional tone of her voice somehow still made Shane want to die.

Shane's head started pounding every time Ilya stepped away from him to let the nurses do their job, and by the time he was discharged, he had simply given up and decided to let his mom deal with everything. He would worry about it tomorrow. Well, he was also worrying about it now, but there was very little that he could do about it, when he couldn't even look at a phone screen to research the paperwork they would need to fill out and the potential legal repercussions of their secrecy. Which definitely wasn't making him feel even worse than he already did. Fuck, did his head hurt.

They had decided on staying at the cottage, for privacy reasons. Shane wasn't famous enough that paparazzi were guaranteed to be parked outside his apartment, but both he and Ilya were extremely recognizable in Montreal (because Shane was near-universally loved when the team was doing well, and Ilya was deeply hated), so the privacy of the cottage would give them all more peace of mind. Shane had been planning to ask Ilya to come to the cottage that summer, had fantasized about stealing a week or two of uninterrupted time. And now, because his stupid head was broken, he wasn't giving Ilya a choice. It didn't quite spoil his excitement, but it wasn't the same as if Ilya had chosen to come with him of his own accord.

During the long drive to the cottage, Shane had closed his eyes and tried not to wince at every stop sign and pothole. He could tell that his dad was driving even more cautiously than

normal, but being in a car for several hours with a broken collarbone and a concussion was inevitably not a fun time. At every wince, Ilya would send reassurance and soothing through the bond.

Shane didn't know how Ilya was taking this whole situation into stride so easily. If the situation had been reversed, and he had suddenly been required to sit out of the playoffs and nurse Ilya through an injury, he didn't think he would have managed to be so tranquil and patient with him. As much as he hated to admit it, he probably would have seriously debated trying to go play anyway, but Ilya was just... sitting there. Calm as could be. Listening to music in the back of his parents' car like they were kids being driven to hockey practice, and not adults headed towards several weeks of unusually close contact where they couldn't even really have sex because of Shane's stupid fucking injury.

The bond was still wide-open between them, and when Shane tried to flip his mental light switch to close their connection, it inevitably flipped back open on its own with the speed of a rotten vegetable dripping down a wall. Ilya constantly kept some part of his body close to Shane – a hand resting on the seat next to him. A foot pressed against his own. A gentle hand on his back as he stepped into the car in a dark, back corner of the hospital parking lot. Ilya was being quiet and respectful, and Shane didn't know what to do with any of it.

The open bond was also full of emotions that Shane didn't know how to parse. The green thing was there, of course, but now it felt like moss on a damp rock and mushrooms and ferns and a few trees. He didn't know how else to explain it, or why Rozanov had a forest growing in his head. There were also some other emotions floating around, brief impressions of red and orange and blue that flitted away before he could parse them. Guilt, he thought he recognized, even though it didn't make sense. Anxiety that matched his own. He wished he was better at understanding the information he was getting from Ilya, but thinking too hard about the bond made his head hurt even worse than it already did.

Ilya reached out a reassuring hand and squeezed his thigh, and another sapling grew in the bond. Shane closed his eyes, pressed his aching head against the cool window, and let the vibrations of the car move through him as he tried unsuccessfully to block Ilya out.

Ilya wandered around the “cottage” that was, more properly described, a luxurious waterfront mansion complete with wood paneling and plaid accents everywhere, like the designer had wanted to be absolutely sure that you knew you were in Canada. There were more personal touches here than there had been at Shane's Montreal condo, like the puck from Shane's first NHL goal sitting on a stand on the mantelpiece of the enormous wood-burning fireplace, but it was clearly still professionally designed and curated. Still, it was warmer and more welcoming than the Montreal condo by far. Ilya liked it.

Shane was exhausted and still in pain, so Ilya and David had immediately navigated him to his bedroom to get him settled while Yuna pattered around evaluating their supplies. The plumber had arrived that morning to turn the well water back on in the house, and the cottage was still creaking to life and mostly empty of food.

“I’ll stop by later today with some groceries,” Yuna said to Ilya, as they stood in the hallway outside of Shane’s bedroom talking with hushed voices.

“Okay.”

“We can help with dinner, too,” she said. “David was planning on cooking this evening, but he can cook here instead since the water is still turned off for the season at our cottage. And... David has to go back to work, unfortunately, but maybe we can have some meals dropped off for you? There’s not very much around here in the way of restaurants that deliver, but I can ask around with the year-round neighbors.”

He shook his head. “No, is okay. I can cook. Protein, carb, vegetable is not too difficult, even for me.”

The idea of Ilya Rozanov cooking for her son seemed to startle her. “Oh, okay,” she said. “We’ll keep it simple. I have a good sense of what Shane will eat, with his diet. I hope you like salmon.”

He nodded his assent. Salmon was fine, even if Hollander’s taste in food was desperately boring.

“Well. Thank you for all this, Ilya. Really,” she said, and briefly reached out to touch his arm.

Ilya was definitely not blushing at the sincere gratitude in Yuna Hollander’s voice. He had wondered, over the years, what they would think of him as Shane’s soulmate, especially when things were difficult at home and he was laying in a dark room with an aching head. Yuna and David were still a little awkward with him, but this relatively easy acceptance had always seemed like an impossibility. And now he was living it, against all odds.

Hollander’s parents headed out with renewed promises to bring groceries and keep in touch, after looking in on a sleepy Shane one more time and squeezing his hands, and after exchanging phone numbers with Ilya. Then Ilya was alone with Shane in the suddenly-silent house.

He briefly debated what to do and where to set up his stuff. Setting up his things in Shane’s bedroom felt a little presumptuous, but perhaps it was silly to assume that he would end up anywhere else, especially when distance was physically painful for both of them. He padded around the room barefoot, trying to be as quiet as possible as he picked the nightstand closer to the door to stow his book, headphones, and phone charger, then deposited his duffle bag into the corner and placed his toothbrush in a spare cup in the ensuite bathroom. Shane was still resting easily by the time he was done... moving in, really. That was a strange thought.

For a few minutes, Ilya sat down on the side of the bed and stared at Shane, watching his chest rise and fall. A wave of gratitude welled up within his chest, both that Shane was alive and would be okay, and that he was here to see it, to make sure. God, he was totally fucked. He was glad that Shane was sleeping so that those emotions wouldn’t transmit through the bond. It was still too much to confront directly, even if it was getting harder and harder to swallow the words *I love you* down. Shane had to know through the bond, anyway.

After a few minutes of indulging himself by watching Shane sleep, Ilya stepped out into the hallway to rest his back against the wall, trying not to disturb Shane's rest while also remaining in close proximity. He called Svetlana. She picked up on the first ring.

"Where are you?" Svetlana asked immediately in their usual Russian. Of course she was in-touch enough with the hockey news to know that he hadn't flown with his team, which was creating the same kind of speculation that swirled when he didn't fly to Nashville after his father's death. With playoffs looming next week, it was a notable event. He might need to release something official to the press soon. He'd texted with the team's PR manager and his team had put out a brief, vague statement about 'personal matters' keeping him in Canada without an expected return date, but he knew that wouldn't hold them for long, especially not during playoff season.

"Canada," he said, answering Svetlana.

"Canada? Why are you still in Canada? Playing nursemaid to Shane Hollander?"

Shit. She always had been too perceptive.

"Ilyusha," she said after he was silent for a second too long. "Tell me that you're not actually staying there for Shane Hollander."

"Sveta, you are not going to like what I am about to tell you," he said.

"Oh, I bet I am not," she said.

"Jane, who I have been texting. Jane is Shane," he said. "We are... fuck. I do not know what we are. We have been... something, for a long time now."

"Shit."

"Yes," Ilya agreed.

Svetlana paused for a moment, and he could hear her chewing something over. "That does not explain why he needs you to not play hockey and stay to wipe his brow," she said.

Fuck. Well, in for a penny.

"...we are also, ah. Bonded," he added.

There was a resounding silence from the other end of the phone, one that made Ilya wince.

"You are a fucking idiot," Svetlana said, with conviction. She was probably not wrong.

"I know."

"No, stop that. No feeling sorry for yourself when it is my turn to speak."

Ilya smiled despite himself. "Okay."

“You are the world’s most monumental asshole,” she said. “Unfathomable. Statues will be erected to your idiocy. You are telling me that you have been bonded to *Shane Hollander* this *entire time*, and not only did you not tell me, your best friend in the whole world, but you also tried to pretend that it is casual and you are not in love with him? While you slept with every pretty woman in a nightclub who looked in your direction? This entire time?”

“How do you know it’s been the entire time?”

“Because I am not an idiot, Ilya! Unlike you! I have been trying to be gentle and patient, and I think then maybe someday you will tell me what is going on with you and *Jane*. Turns out I should have been hitting you upside the head until you tell me all your secrets, because clearly you cannot be trusted to look out for your own happiness.”

“Wow,” Ilya said.

“Yes,” Svetlana agreed.

“I can speak now?”

“If you must.”

“...actually, I do not know what to say. Fuck, Sveta.”

“Hmm, good thing I also know what you are going to say. You are going to say Svetlana, you are brilliant and beautiful. Please tell me what to do.”

“Svetlana, you are brilliant and beautiful. Please tell me what to do,” Ilya parroted dutifully.

“You cannot come to the playoffs? He will wither away without you?”

Ilya sighed. “It’s his head, with the concussion. He needs me close, for now, or he will be very sick.”

“Then you need to come clean. About all of it. Tell team management, register the bond, and for fuck’s sake, tell that boy that you love him.”

Ilya remained silent.

“Ilya. My darling idiot. *Have* you told him that you love him?”

“He can see it in my head,” Ilya said. He wondered what his head felt like for Shane. The sheer amount of love he felt towards Shane was overwhelming when he looked at it too closely, but did Shane want to sink into his feeling the way he wanted to sink into the ocean in Shane’s mind? Did it feel as invigorating, as comforting, for him? Was Shane as terrified as he was?

“That is not the same thing!” Svetlana objected. “Has he told you?”

“No.”

“Does he love you?”

“Yes.”

She made a frustrated noise. “Ilyusha. You are very dear to me.”

“As are you.”

“Yes, I know. Because you show me. But it is also important that you say these things out loud. That you *talk* to each other, even if you are bonded.”

“I know, Sveta.”

“Do you?”

“It is... it is just hard. A difficult situation. You know I will never be able to go back. And... I do not know if he wants me here, to be honest. Even with the bond, it is not always easy to tell.”

“Oh, Ilyusha,” Svetlana said with a sigh. “There is nothing in Russia for you now, anyway. I need to get back to work, but you will do what you need to do, yes? And you will call me? And you will never attempt to hide something this important from me again?”

“I will call you,” he agreed, and he thought that he heard her sigh again as the phone line clicked.

By the time that Shane woke up in early evening to the smell of his dad’s cooking wafting from the kitchen, Ilya had claimed a nightstand and his toothbrush was sitting in the bathroom. Currently, he was sitting on the bed next to Shane reading a hefty novel in Russian, as if this was something that they did every day. When Shane had asked, he’d said it was some kind of contemporary crime drama. He’d offered to explain the details, but the sheer number of characters made Shane’s head spin. Ilya had laughed at him, pushing amusement through the bond, and turned back to his book.

Shane allowed himself to float. He had been weaned off the heavier drugs, but he still had a fairly hefty painkiller prescription for the first week. Ilya, in the process of moving into his house, had also somehow taken over management of his medications and apparently promised to cook, as Yuna informed him when bustling around in his room depositing extra arm slings and heavy-duty sunglasses and other supplies around his room.

After a little while, he noticed that Ilya had put his book down and was frowning at his phone. His end of the bond was filled with frustration, which Shane could read pretty easily for once.

“What?” Shane asked.

Ilya glanced at him, then returned to his phone. “Texting with my agent. He is negotiating with Bears management about my personal leave.”

“Oh.”

“Are they very unhappy?”

“Of course they are unhappy. No Captain in playoffs is big deal,” Ilya answered, and then he put his phone down despite the continued buzzing of notifications. “But, there is nothing for it. So.”

Ilya picked up his book again. Shane studied him. He still seemed so unbothered by this situation, even when he was actively letting down his teammates and spurning the organization that had invested millions of dollars into his development as a player. What Shane didn’t ask, although he desperately wanted to, was whether *Ilya* was unhappy. He felt unhappy in the bond, like everything he had been feeling had been painted over with grey.

Shane looked at the bond paperwork, which his dad had left sitting on the nightstand on what was now, apparently, his side of the bed. He was starting to have his doubts about registering the bond, after already exposing their relationship to so many other people. Maybe if he didn’t fill it out, this whole situation would simply go away. He rolled over and pressed his face down into the mattress until they were called to dinner.

They went down to the dining room together, with Ilya keeping a hand on his back to steady him when he wobbled on the short flight of stairs. They sat side-by-side at the table, feet pressed together, bond open with the green feelings and something that felt a little like nerves, from Ilya’s side. It was intimate and gentle, and Ilya was on his best behavior for his parents.

If only Ilya was here because he wanted to be. This... playacting at perfection was so close to everything he’d wanted that it was making Shane irrationally angry, and he stabbed at his steamed broccoli with perhaps a little more aggression than strictly called for at a family dinner, trying very hard not to think about the mysterious green that kept filling the bond.

In the morning, Ilya woke up first, which certainly would never happen if Hollander wasn’t concussed and on pain meds. He considered the distance for a minute, but after brushing his teeth and throwing on a pair of sweatpants, he decided that walking to the kitchen wasn’t too risky for Hollander’s health. He did feel a headache coming on as he stood over the stove, cooking egg whites to put over the disgusting whole grain toast that Shane would apparently eat as one of his few concessions to carbohydrates, but the headache eased as Shane padded into the kitchen.

The relief of the headache dissipating was short-lived. Shane was projecting his emotions into the bond again, almost as loudly as he had been projecting in the hospital. This time, the overwhelming emotions were *annoyance*, *worry*, *frustration*. Ilya glanced around the kitchen. Was he cooking eggs that wrong?

“I take yolks out,” he said. Perhaps Hollander was concerned that he was cooking an unhealthy breakfast. “Use whole wheat toast. You will like.”

That didn't seem to work. The bond bloomed with surprise, but quickly settled into a kind of dissatisfied guilt. Ilya blew out a breath. Now did not seem like the moment to address Hollander's relationship with food, but this was an objectively strange reaction to eggs.

"You sleep okay? How is head?" he tried, which was apparently also not the right thing to say, because the bond washed with annoyance. Maybe he was being overbearing.

"You sound like my mother," Shane said.

"Hmm, no. Not your mother, but I *am* very scared of your mother. She will know if I don't take good care."

Shane stared down at the counter and began picking at his cuticles. He was still feeling so much, and very loudly, and Ilya sighed internally.

"What?" Ilya asked, not turning away from the eggs.

"I didn't say anything."

Ilya glanced at him over his shoulder. "I know. But I can feel. So. What?"

"I don't know," Shane said. "It's just. Weird, isn't it?"

"What's weird? Eggs are weird?" Ilya asked. Even with the bonds open, there were times when Shane simply didn't make any sense.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Shane shrug. "You just seem so... comfortable."

"Oh, I should be uncomfortable?"

"No! Of course not. I want you to be comfortable here. It's just... it's weird." Shane said, and the bond was roiling with discomfort.

"I am trying to be nice!" Ilya said. "To be... what is word. Considerate. I can be nice."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" Ilya asked. He did not think this was about the eggs anymore, but he also had no idea what it *was* actually about. Even though he could feel Shane's emotions flowing freely through the bond, he couldn't decipher the source of those emotions, and he didn't want to push his luck by reaching for Shane's thoughts when the other man was already sharing so much more information than usual. Was Shane really so unhappy at his being here?

"I don't know."

"Is just fucking eggs, Hollander," he said. "I can make something else. You want oatmeal? Plain, to match your boring?" He poked at him a little in the bond. See, he could still make fun of him.

“No, no,” Shane said, and now he felt a little chagrined and guilty again in the bond. “Uh. Thank you for making breakfast.” Ilya sighed, went to make his far more interesting egg scramble that he was planning on topping with as much sriracha as he could handle, and decided to leave it there.

On the day of the first playoff game against New York that Ilya would have to miss, Shane woke up at his usual 6 am for the first time since the concussion. Ilya was in bed next to him on his side, turned away from him in his sleep. Shane debated getting up and going for his usual run, since he was awake anyway, but it was a drizzly, cold spring morning with mist rising over the lake, and his collarbone still hurt enough that it was probably a bad idea. Instead, he let himself lay in bed, watching Ilya’s side gently rise and fall above the blanket that was slung down over his hips.

He was grateful that Ilya was here. He really was. He had wanted to wake up like this with Ilya for so long, with the bond open and soft and quiet with sleep between them. He just hated that Ilya was forced to be here, especially since he was missing hockey because of Shane’s stupid mistake. Especially because he was missing *the playoffs*. He didn’t feel resentment in the bond, necessarily, but it was only a matter of time before Ilya would come to resent being trapped here with him.

Surely they could separate by now. Yes, the doctor had said at least a week, and sure, it had only been four days, but Shane was already feeling so much better. The light didn’t hurt quite so much, even with the dawn sunlight starting to rise over the lake, and his head barely hurt at all yesterday. He’d only had, like, two headaches.

He wondered, sometimes, about the strength of their bond. He had never really talked to his parents about what the bond felt like, but he knew that they shared emotions freely. Sometimes, when it was a kid, they would share a look over his head where he thought they were sharing thoughts. Then again, their soulbond had developed over multiple decades of marriage, strengthened by close proximity and constant connection.

As he lay with Ilya, he reached out to feel the bond, examining it carefully as he rarely did. He used to visualize the bond as an electrical cord, but that didn’t feel like an accurate description anymore. Now it felt like one of the enormous, twisted cables that they used to build suspension bridges. He visualized running his hands along the bond. When had it gotten so strong? Was it even possible to break anymore? He couldn’t imagine it, and the bond sparked with displeasure at the thought.

The mental exercise made a headache start pounding behind his eyes. His pain must have transferred through the bond, or maybe Shane’s examination of the bond disturbed him, because Ilya woke up and rolled over. “Shane?” he said, sleepy and projecting soothing through the bond.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m fine.”

Ilya reached out a sleepy arm, and Shane felt the headache ease, just slightly, as Ilya ran a sleepy hand against his cheekbone. Careful of Shane’s fractured collarbone, Ilya rolled over

to him, keeping Shane on his back, and arranged himself so that his head was nestled into Shane's other shoulder. Ilya slung a leg over Shane's hips and they settled against each other, sharing warmth.

"You think too much," Ilya said. "Is not good. Hurt your brain."

Shane said nothing, snaking his arm around Ilya's back and trying not to project his worry into the bond. He didn't think he was successful.

"Why are you worried?" Ilya asked, sure enough.

"Just thinking. About the playoffs."

Ilya sighed, and his hand came up to stroke gently at Shane's chest. Shane started carding a hand through his curls. "What about playoffs?" Ilya asked. "That Montreal is going to lose?"

"No. Just... are you sure you don't want to go play?"

Ilya felt unhappy in the bond. Shane winced. He knew that Ilya probably did want to go play, and maybe it was unfair of him to bring it up when he was the reason that Ilya couldn't be in the playoffs in the first place.

"I keep telling you I am not asshole," Ilya said, pressing a kiss against his shoulder. "I stay until head is better."

"I know."

"Is *one game*," Ilya said, his accent thickening as he drifted back to sleep. "Stop worry."

"Okay," Shane said.

"Go to sleep," Ilya said, and even though Shane usually found it very difficult to fall back asleep once he was already awake, even though sleeping pressed together often made him overheated and overwhelmed, he still managed to drift off again, with Ilya's comforting weight still plastered against his body.

Once they woke up, much later than Shane normally would under any circumstances, they migrated to the kitchen. Shane let Ilya go down the stairs first, and was relieved when his head didn't immediately start pounding at the distance. He was getting better. He lingered at the top of the stairs until Ilya yelled a question about the location of his rice cooker, and then he walked down to join him in the kitchen.

Shane sat at the island, watching as Ilya threw together chicken-rice-veggie bowls with the lean, organic meat and sliced vegetables that Shane's parents had left in the fridge. Ilya was adding sour cream to his bowl, which seemed disgusting. They ate in a silence that felt companionable, if not easy, then settled on the couch for the remainder of the afternoon. Ilya had brought his novel from the bedroom, but since Shane still couldn't look at either a book or screen for extended periods of time without giving himself a pounding headache, he

burrowed under the plaid throw and closed his eyes. But of course, since he'd slept in, sleep was slow to come.

Ilya had settled right next to him on the couch, even though there was plenty of space for two full-grown hockey players. After a little while, Shane felt brave enough to scooch backwards until his head was resting on Ilya's thigh. Ilya twisted a little to accommodate him and ease the stretch on his neck, and his hand came to card through Shane's hair again. He sighed, relaxing into the couch and the warmth of Ilya's thigh. The bond bloomed green. But after about ten minutes, the hand in his hair stopped moving, then pulled away entirely. Shane cracked his eyes open. Ilya was looking at his phone, and the bond was yellow with unhappiness again.

"Who are you texting?" Shane asked.

"Still my agent," he said. "Bears management. Team. Everyone unhappy, everyone wants an explanation."

"Sorry," Shane said.

Ilya shook his head. "Not your fault," he said. Shane was about to protest that this was obviously untrue, but then his phone began buzzing with an incoming call and Ilya swore under his breath in Russian. "Sorry, I have to take this."

Ilya gently eased Shane's head down onto the couch, grabbing a throw pillow to put under Shane's head in place of his thigh. Shane felt cold as soon as he left, curling in on himself at the discontent in the bond between them.

After a few minutes listening to and feeling the doubled misery and frustration between them, Shane got up and grabbed the extra hoodie that he kept hanging on the downstairs coat rack. Sliding on the first pair of sandals he saw, he stepped out the sliding glass door and walked down to the dock, pulling the hood over his head to protect himself from the light misting rain. It was still cold, especially by the water, but he wanted to see how far he could get from Ilya without pain. Maybe he should take a walk around the lake to give Ilya some space. That would be a good test.

"What are you doing?" came Ilya's voice from behind him, but Shane didn't turn, watching the tiny droplets of rain on the surface of the glass-calm lake.

"Testing."

Ilya huffed a laugh. "Testing what? Like, *testing*, 1-2-3? Going to give big speech?"

"No," Shane said with a scowl, turning towards Ilya as he came to stand next to Shane on the dock. He also wasn't dressed warm enough for the weather, and Shane felt a stab of guilt for making him come outside to get him. "Testing the distance."

Ilya sighed, and the bond was awash with grey. "Shane," he said. "What the fuck. I thought we *talked* about this already."

Shane scuffed his foot against the dock. His toes were cold. He shouldn't have put sandals on at this time of year, but he hated wearing tennis shoes without socks.

"It's the playoffs, Ilya," he said. "You're the captain. You've already missed one game, they could... they could take the captaincy, they could find some loophole to void your contract, they could put you on waivers, who fucking knows."

"Shane. How many times I say this. It is *one* fucking game."

"It's the playoffs!"

"It is fine! There is clause in my contract for bondmate emergency," Ilya said. "My agent say, just now. Is bulletproof. All we need to do is send paperwork."

Shane looked back down at the dock and scuffed his foot again. His toes really were cold.

"What," Ilya said.

"I didn't *say* anything," Shane said to the lake. He hated that Ilya could read him so easily, that it was impossible to keep the bond closed.

"No, but bond is full. Come on. Tell me."

"Maybe... maybe we don't fill out the paperwork," he said. "I know it would cause issues for you, with going back to Russia. Plus it could leak to the press so easily. It would change everything. And we have the NDAs in place, with the hospital, so it's not like we'll get in trouble."

"Doctor explained why it is dangerous. I thought we decide already, to register. To do paperwork," Ilya said, and now Shane could tell that he was upsetting him, which was the last thing he'd wanted. It was just... a big decision. They shouldn't rush into it because they felt like they had to after Shane's injury, not when it could change everything.

"I know," Shane said. "I know. But... are you sure?"

Shane knew that he wasn't the best at reading the bond. But within all of the confusing colors of swirling emotions that he didn't understand, he was pretty sure of one fact: deep down, Ilya wasn't sure. He was scared, and angry, and Shane couldn't tell if it was at the situation or at him. Either way, it didn't seem like a great time to file paperwork that could potentially get both of them into legal trouble or initiate *citizenship proceedings* for Ilya. Did he even want that? They hadn't even said if they were boyfriends, and now Ilya was considering giving up his *country* for Shane?

For the first time since the concussion, he could feel Ilya trying to put up a block in the bond. Shane winced at the feeling, and Ilya dropped the walls again immediately.

"Why are you still asking this? I already tell you a million times, I will stay here until your head is better," he said.

“I know,” Shane said, frustrated with his inability to explain. It just wasn’t fair to either of them. Nothing about this situation was fair.

“Fuck,” Ilya said vehemently. “Fuck this. I need to go make a call. Don’t ask me this again.”

“He keeps trying to make me go play,” Ilya said to Svetlana on the phone almost as soon as she picked up.

“Yes, that is because he is an idiot like you, but one who is somehow even more obsessed with hockey,” Svetlana said. “This is why you are soulmates.”

“What do I do?”

“Well. What will happen if you go play?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya said. “He will get sick. Maybe I will get sick. The worst-case scenario would be another seizure, which could be dangerous.”

“And if you don’t go?”

“Then we will file bond paperwork and tell Boston now, and worry about Montreal later. There is a risk of a leak to the public, from the government office where we must file the paperwork. Not sure what teams will do.”

“Hmm. Dangerous seizure is the worst possible outcome of the possible outcomes. So you don’t go. File the paperwork, deal with Boston. You are their star player, they will come up with some excuse for you.”

“You think?”

“Yes, idiot.”

Ilya heaved a deep sigh, and slid down further on the couch. Shane was still standing outside in the rain, staring at the lake and projecting misery through the bond, and Ilya didn’t know how to fix any of this.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Thank you, Sveta.”

“Yes, yes,” she said. “Tell him you love him. Don’t call me again until you do,” she said, and hung up.

On the morning of the third playoff game against New York, Shane took a long walk around a significant part of the lake, hugging the shoreline until he turned around at the local park with a playground. There were a few families outside, since it was a beautiful sunny day, one of the first days when the temperature reached 10 degrees Celsius and he started wanting to walk around in a t-shirt, even though the same temperature in the fall would have him pulling

out a hoodie. Still, the lake was far more occupied in the summer. He enjoyed the quiet, especially now.

Ever since their conversation on the dock, he and Ilya had been snippy and distant despite their close proximity. It was strange. They were falling asleep in the same bed, and waking up together. They spent nearly every waking second together, and Ilya had started reading Shane his novel to alleviate the boredom, even though Shane couldn't understand the Russian. Ilya was still startlingly gentle and patient with him, helping him with getting his clothes on and off for showering given his limited arm mobility. But the bond was constantly full of frustration, and at this rate, Shane didn't know who it belonged to.

He'd dreamed of stealing time together at the cottage, but after the season, when they both had a break from responsibilities and pressure. He'd imagined them relaxed and sunburned, swimming and enjoying each other's company. He'd also, well. Imagined Ilya fucking him in almost every room in the house. But even though his head felt better, and he thought he was probably up for some blowjobs at the very minimum, if they were careful about positioning, the simmering mood between them didn't seem particularly conducive to initiating sex. For once, Ilya wasn't trying to start anything, and Shane didn't know how to overcome the strange block between them.

It wasn't surprising. Ilya must be frustrated about the playoff series. If Boston lost this game, like they lost the first two games, then winning the series would be a monumental task, although not impossible. Without Ilya, however, it probably *would* be impossible. And that would all be Shane's fault.

Ilya had been on the phone again when Shane slipped out of the house, but by the time he returned, flushed with exertion even though he'd only been walking, Ilya was sitting on the front step waiting for him. He stood up as soon as Shane walked into range for detailed information to flow through their bond.

"Shane, fuck," Ilya said. "Where have you been?"

He shrugged. "Took a walk."

"Why did you not tell me? We could go together if you want to get out."

"You were on the phone!" Shane said, feeling uncomfortably like a scolded child.

"Okay. Okay. I can feel you do not go too far, but I did not know," he said. "How do you feel? Okay?"

Shane felt awful. His stomach was cramping, his legs felt shaky, and his collarbone had jolted with every step by the end of the walk. Plus, his soulmate, who was supposed to know everything about him without even asking, was asking him questions about how he *felt*. If Ilya couldn't tell in the bond, then Shane had no words for him.

"It's been more than a full week," Shane said. "I'm fine. No seizure. You need to go play."

Ilya glared at him. The bond was full of the deepest misery Shane had felt from him, quite possibly ever, and the frustration had grown into a crackling web along their connection. “We already talk about this, so many times. Don’t make me say it again.”

Shane shook his head, then refused to break eye contact, even though every fiber of his being wanted to look away from the devastation in Ilya’s eyes and in the bond. “I was gone for an hour. I was way more than a kilometer away, and I’m fine. There’s no reason for you to be stuck here.”

“Hollander, I am not stuck here. I tell you that I stay.”

“Of course you’re stuck here! And it’s my fault, okay. But I’m fine, and I don’t want you here if you’re miserable, so you should go.”

Ilya’s side of the bond went gray. “Not want me here?” he said.

Shane shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. I just don’t want you to feel obligated to stay, not when your team needs you. I’ll call my parents, it’ll be fine.”

Ilya was silent. Shane broke eye contact. He couldn’t help it.

“Hollander. Shane. I will go, if you want me to go. But I will also stay, if you want me to stay.” Ilya said.

“I know,” Shane said, and swallowed with a click around the sudden lump of emotion in his throat. “I want you to go play.”

Ilya made a frustrated noise, and the bond went orange. “I can feel when you are lying to me, you know.”

Shane’s eyes snapped back to Ilya’s. “I’m not lying,” he said, trying to project determination and surety into the bond, but he wasn’t sure if he was doing it right. It wasn’t fair of Ilya to tell him how he was feeling, even though he also desperately *wanted* Ilya to know how he was feeling so he didn’t have to figure it out for himself.

“Okay,” Ilya said. “Fine. Fine, okay. Fuck. I go play.”

It felt like Ilya was trying to close the bond again, like he was holding something back. Shane thought he was mad, but he didn’t understand why. They stood in a tense standoff outside the house for another few moments, and then Ilya stood up and walked into the house, leaving the door open carelessly behind him and kicking his slides off against the wall with more force than was strictly necessary.

Shane followed him helplessly into the house, watching as Ilya marched up to the bedroom, presumably to grab his duffle bag and leave. Shane’s heart dropped to his stomach, even though this was exactly what they had both been hoping for: that Shane would get better, and Ilya could go play. His dad had driven Shane’s car up over the weekend so that they could go grocery shopping if necessary, but there was only one car in the driveway. That was fine. Ilya could take it, leave it at the airport. It wasn’t like Shane could go anywhere anyway.

When Ilya came back down the stairs, he wasn't just holding his packed duffle bag. He was also holding the bond paperwork that Shane had been avoiding all week.

Staring him dead in the eye, Ilya grabbed a pen from the kitchen junk drawer, then slapped the packet of paperwork down on the kitchen island and signed his name in all the places where Shane's dad had marked with an "X" and "Ilya," anticipating that the legalistic language of the paperwork might be difficult to parse. Ilya flipped through the papers, confirming that he had signed and dated in all the appropriate places, then handed the pen to Shane.

"I'm coming back," Ilya said. "Right after the game. And we are filing paperwork. I know you will want to read everything fourteen times. But sign. Please."

"Okay," Shane said. He followed Ilya as he walked out of the house, not sure what he expected, but on the front step, Ilya turned back around and looked at him.

Ilya stepped closer to him, taking his good hand in his own. His expression gentled, even though the bond was still orange with frustration. It was also blooming with the green, growing feeling that Shane didn't know how to interpret. Ilya leaned in and pressed a single, hard kiss to his lips, and with a start, Shane realized that they hadn't properly kissed since the concussion, although Ilya had pressed gentle kisses to his hair and back. When Ilya pulled away, Shane opened his eyes and instinctively chased after Ilya's lips.

Ilya squeezed Shane's hand, but didn't kiss him again. "Call your parents, okay?" he said. "Don't be alone."

Shane nodded, and then Ilya turned, walked to the car, and was gone.

As he got in the car and drove away, the bond that had occupied his whole head for the past week dwindled down to a single, golden point of connection. Shane turned and walked back into the house, clenching the hand that Ilya had squeezed into a fist and telling himself that his head didn't hurt.

Ilya felt like shit. He'd spent all day traveling, barely making it to the rink in time for the game. Eating anything had sounded unappealing, let alone overpriced airport food, so he had choked down a sandwich from the all-day breakfast menu at the airport McDonald's in Logan International before heading to the rink.

His teammates had been texting him relentlessly since he missed the flight back to Boston. At first, the texts had been good-natured ribbing about staying behind for his Montreal girl, but when he failed to appear the first game of their playoff series, the texts turned to genuine concern and confusion. He had ignored all of them, not sure what to say. He and his agent had agreed on sharing part of the truth, given his contract: that his bondmate had an emergency, and he'd been medically required to stay with them for a short period of time. Management wanted the paperwork, so they would know it was Shane. But his team? They would have a million questions, and they needed to trust him as their captain, but he didn't know how to answer any of them, especially with where he and Shane were now.

There was part of Ilya that wanted to yell from the rooftops that Shane Hollander was his soulmate, consequences be damned. That part was reckless, and quickly shouted down by the memory of Shane's determination to get him to leave. He'd spent the past week inside Hollander's home and his head, but he still didn't know what the other man wanted from him.

He would have to provide some answers soon. As soon as the second game of the series came and went without any definitive answers from Ilya, both his coach and his agent had started to get a little pushier. His agent had promised the front office that they would have the soulbond paperwork and an explanation within 24 hours of game three, which was the only reason that Ilya wasn't benched. He hoped that would still be possible. Even then, he would need to answer some questions in person. As soon as he'd confirmed that he was on a plane and would be present for game three of the series, his coach had scheduled an emergency meeting immediately after the game, which he had spent the entire flight dreading.

Most of the guys in the locker room seemed content to give him his space, although he could feel their curious eyes on him. Based on what he'd seen of himself in the mirror of the airport bathroom, he thought he probably looked as bad as he felt. He was being too quiet, unlike himself. He didn't feel very much like himself, at the moment.

"Hey," Marlow said, bumping their shoulders together. He seemed a little tentative, still, perhaps remembering Ilya's reaction after the hit in Montreal. If Ilya was a good captain, he would reassure Marlow that he wasn't angry about the hit, that he knew that Marlow hadn't intended to hurt Hollander, and that they were okay. He didn't feel like a good captain today.

"You okay, man?"

"Yeah," he said, and stared into the depth of his stall.

"Okay," Marlow said. "You know you can talk to us, right? We're here for you, cap."

Ilya nodded. His head hurt.

He hadn't felt up to giving his usual pre-game captain speech, letting Marlow rally the troops while he fiddled with his skate laces and retaped his stick, over and over. Marlow still seemed nervous around him, uncertain after his reaction in Montreal, even though objectively Ilya knew that the hit was clean and it hadn't been his fault.

He was playing tense the whole game. The ice usually felt like freedom, but with the bond dwindled down to a single thread, his stomach was in knots and he wanted nothing more than to curl around the pain in his gut. He didn't even have a good retort when Scott Hunter chirped him during their third faceoff with an infuriating quip: "Still deciding whether you want to show up, Rozanov?"

They lost. Ilya couldn't really find it in himself to care. He turned the shower in the locker room to freezing cold and let himself stand there as most of his teammates filtered in and out, wondering how long it would take for him to drown. By the time he got back into the locker room, most of the media and most of his teammates had cleared out, frustrated and largely silent. Ilya pulled his phone out of his locker, blinking at the brightness as if he was the one with the concussion, not Shane.

As soon as he saw the notifications on the lock screen, his stomach dropped. He had five missed calls from Shane, three from Yuna, two from David, one from an unknown number, and thirty-five unread texts on his phone.

“*Blyat*,” he muttered, trying to unlock his phone with shaking fingers.

“Rozanov?” came the voice of an unfamiliar staff member with an ID badge that identified him as part of the Bears’ security team. Fuck. He was just beginning to wonder if the team thought he needed a *security escort* to ensure that he attended a mandatory emergency meeting, when the man continued and said, “You have a visitor.”

“What?” he asked, but followed the man dutifully out of the locker room, pulling on a clean shirt as he went. As he was walking out of the locker room, the bond flared to life with a miserable mix of panic and pain. What the fuck. Shane was *here*?

Sure enough, the security guard led him to a back hallway near the team entrance for the rink. There were enough people milling around that this was definitely a bad idea, but Ilya didn’t care. Shane was white as a sheet and shaking, projecting almost as loudly into the bond as he had been after the initial concussion.

Ilya went to him immediately, putting hands on his waist to steady him. “Shane?” he asked. “What – I told you I come back. Why are you here?”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” Shane said. “Oh. You feel nice.”

He leaned forward until he could thunk his head against Ilya’s shoulder and melted into Ilya’s body, wrapping his good arm around Ilya’s back. People were looking at them, but instead of panicking about being observed, Shane sunk further into his body, careless of the arm still in a sling. Ilya couldn’t read anything through the bond other than profound, dizzy relief at being reunited.

Ilya was left supporting Shane’s mostly-dead weight in the echoey, sterile rink hallway, trying very hard not to panic.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to state for the record that I wrote about the cottage having well water BEFORE the episode came out. nothing but accurate lake house logistics in my gay fanfiction

also, chapter five is mostly written and will be here soon. you may be mad at me if you wish, as long as you are not mad at Shane, whom I love very dearly and who is concussed and confused and will figure it out soon.

Chapter 5: The Journey

Chapter Notes

So. Despite my sincere intentions and best efforts, the chapter count has gone up. Whoops. The final chapter will be an epilogue.

everyone throws the obligatory shaming tomatoes

Anyway. Without further ado. Here is 5k words of... airport logistics?

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Shane spent the first hour after he watched Ilya drive away telling himself that they had made the right decision, that it was normal for his stomach to be cramping so badly that all he wanted to do was curl up in a ball on the couch. He burrowed under the plaid blanket on the couch, laying on the throw pillow that Ilya had once stuck under his head and definitely not wishing that he was still laying on Ilya's thigh.

He was fine. He was not going to fall apart the second Ilya walked away from him. Except that with every passing minute, his headache got worse, until he was burying his head under the throw blanket to block out the light. It felt like there was a band of pressure wrapping around his temples, getting tighter and tighter, almost as bad as the pain had been right after the initial hit. His face felt a little bit numb, and after another twenty minutes or so, even the little bit of light peeking around the edge of the blanket was starting to hurt his head. He breathed, shallow and wheezy, and screwed his eyes shut.

The bond, stretched thin with distance, was normally quiescent when they were apart. Now, though, the cord between them twitched like a snake warning that it was about to strike. The movement tugged at the back of Shane's head, and he knew if he followed the tug, the bond would pull him towards Ilya.

No one knew that he was alone. He had promised Ilya that he would call his parents, but that would require opening his eyes, and that sounded bad. Plus they hadn't really talked since the revelation about his soulbond with Ilya, and he had no idea how they felt about him being gay, or any of it, really. But no one knew that he was alone. He didn't know what would happen, if he kept laying here. Eventually the sun would go down, and that would help. But what if it didn't? What if his head just imploded? Or what if he had another seizure, like the one he'd had in the ambulance and could barely remember? Would Ilya come back and find him like this, or worse?

He curled as tight as he could under the blanket, aided by the flexibility of yoga but hampered by the stupid sling still around his arm. Curling into a tighter ball hurt his collarbone but made his roiling stomach feel marginally better. Fuck. Ilya wouldn't be back

for hours, if he was even able to come back today at all. He felt a few pathetic tears roll down his chin at the thought of being alone like this for that long.

All of this was his own stupid fault. He got caught with his head down. He told Ilya to go. He insisted he was fine. He couldn't call Ilya, who was either driving or already at the airport. Ilya drove like a maniac. If Shane called him, Ilya would be distracted. Or he wouldn't pick up, because he was on a plane. He had insisted. It wasn't Ilya's fault. Shane had to do something, though. If he sat here feeling like this for much longer he was actually, genuinely going to explode.

He tried to calm the racing spiral of his thoughts, without much success. What could he do? He could wait it out. He would probably be fine. He was probably just panicking and wasn't really going to die. He'd felt worse than this before, probably, and Ilya would eventually come back and fix his stupid broken head, and Shane would have to beg him not to leave again, even though he'd told him to go in the first place. Fuck.

Or he could go to Boston.

They needed to be in the same place, and they had chosen the cottage for privacy, but there was no reason for Shane to compromise Ilya's ability to play now that they no longer needed to stay in the same room. He had told him to go, and he meant it. But he could fly to Boston, and then they would be in the same place again, and Ilya would make his headache better and everything would be okay. Ilya wouldn't have to come back and scrape him off the floor.

Going to Boston was still risky. People might take pictures of him at the airport. Oh, god, the airport. He spent so much of his life in airports, and every single time he went through security, he still was worried that he'd accidentally packed a giant hunting knife that he didn't actually own, or that he'd somehow accidentally packed his dildo. Plus the crush of crowds sounded like absolute hell, especially when he already felt like dogshit. Also, he wasn't supposed to be looking at screens and his brain felt like it was trying to escape his skull, so he wasn't sure how he was supposed to get to the airport or even look at his phone long enough to book a ticket.

He pulled out his phone, wincing at the light from the screen. He hovered his finger over his mom's contact information for a second, and then scrolled a little further and called Hayden.

"Hey, Shane," came his friend's voice on the phone. "Thought you weren't supposed to be looking at screens?"

"I'm not looking at the screen," he said. It was true. He had Hayden on speaker, and the screen was dimmed again. "Hey, uh. Can you book me a flight to Boston?"

"...what?" Hayden asked.

Maybe their connection was bad. "Can you book me a flight to Boston?" he repeated.

"Heard you the first time, just a little confused. Why do you need to go to Boston?"

Shane gripped his phone so hard that the case creaked, and tried to curl his knees even tighter into his chest. “I just... I need to.”

“Is Rozanov back in Boston? Is that what’s going on?” Hayden asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll kill him,” Hayden said, with vehemence.

“No, no, no. Hayd. I told him to go. I was... being stupid, I don’t know.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have left anyway!”

“Hayd. Please. Can you just—I can’t. Not right now. Can you please just book me a ticket?”

Hayden paused for a second, and Shane heard murmured voices on the other end of the line. Jackie, he thought. “Wait, are you alone right now?” Hayden asked, after a moment. “Where are your parents?”

He didn’t know. Back in Ottawa, probably, but he hadn’t called them even though he’d promised that he would keep them in the loop. And he’d promised Ilya that he would. He just... couldn’t face them right now.

“Shane. Buddy. Can I call your mom?”

His eyes snapped open. “No!”

Hayden sighed. “I’m putting you on speaker,” he said. “I had to tell Jackie. Sorry.”

Shane shifted restlessly on the sofa. This was turning into a longer conversation than he wanted, but he genuinely didn’t think he could manage to input his credit card details accurately into a website right now. He never saved his card details for security reasons and to prevent online impulse shopping, but right now, he wished he could be a little less goddamn cautious about everything. This was such a fucking mess. His whole life was such a fucking mess.

“Shane,” came Jackie’s voice over the phone. “Hi. So you need to get to Boston?”

“Mmhmm.”

“We’re a little further away than your parents, but Montreal still isn’t too far,” Jackie said. “We could come get you, if you don’t want to be alone.”

“No, no, thanks Jackie. I just. I need to get to Boston. I need, um,” Shane said. The bond still felt oddly restless, and there was only one remedy.

“You need your soulmate,” Jackie said, gentle.

“Ew,” said Hayden.

“Hayden,” said Jackie.

“Sorry.”

“Okay,” Jackie said. “Okay, Shane. We can help you get to Boston. But can we call your mom?”

“Yeah, I know she’s been worried about you,” Hayden added. “She’s been texting me. But I hadn’t heard anything either, so.”

Shane put his head between his knees again.

“Shane?”

“Okay,” he said. Anything that would get him to Ilya faster. He would need someone to drive him to the airport, anyway. An uber would be hard to come by, this far out, or it would be expensive as all hell. Did he still have the number for that rural taxi service stuck in a drawer somewhere?

“Okay,” echoed Hayden.

“We love you, Shane,” Jackie said, and Shane wrapped his good arm around himself and tried to screw his eyes even tighter shut than they already were.

Shane heard the crunch of tires on his gravel driveway about an hour later, which didn’t make any sense, unless his mom managed to break the sound barrier getting here from Ottawa. She did tend to drive faster than his dad, who always drove exactly at the speed limit, but not *that* much faster. Not as fast as Ilya. He poked his head out from underneath the blanket, blinking owlshly in the light, but he didn’t bother to get up off the couch as she let herself into the house.

“Shane?” she called as she entered the house, and then she rounded the corner and saw him on the couch.

“Hi,” he croaked.

“Oh, you look terrible,” she said, quickly walking over to him to lay a hand on his forehead. He felt terrible. His skin was clammy and his whole body ached like he had the flu, waves of cramping wrongness rolling through him.

“How did you get here so quick?” he asked.

“Boston announced that Rozanov was in the lineup for tonight. I started driving here as soon as I heard,” she said. “I can’t believe the nerve of him. I mean, I understand loyalty to your team, trust me, but he should never have left you like this.”

If he’d felt a little better, Shane would have smiled. Of course that’s what his mom was focused on at a time like this.

“No, mom,” he said, shaking his head. “I made him go.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have left you. Not when he promised,” Yuna replied.

“You sound like Hayden.”

“Yes, and I’m glad that Hayden called me,” she said, leaning back and crossing her arms over her chest. “Care to explain why Hayden *had* to call me, instead of you reaching out directly?”

He wanted the ground beneath him to swallow him up. “M sorry,” he said, and was horrified to find that his voice was choked with tears.

“Oh, honey, no,” she said, voice softening instantly as she quickly moved to sit down beside him, throwing an arm over his shoulders. “I don’t want you to be sorry. I just... we haven’t really had a chance to *talk* about any of this.”

All he could do in that moment was try to choke back tears as he shook his head, eyes screwed shut. He knew that a conversation with his parents was unavoidable and that everyone in his life would have questions. He also knew they probably had a right to feel betrayed about him lying to them for years. But right now, if he had to answer those questions before his mom would book him a ticket, he was ready to forget the airport, head out the front door, and just start walking towards Boston. Google Maps did pedestrian directions, right?

“Hayden said you want to fly to Boston?” she asked, rubbing a soothing hand over his back. Okay. Okay. He could do this. This was happening.

“Yeah,” he said. “I have to.”

It was the only way he could see to salvage this situation, even if he would never manage to quite salvage his dignity again after coming out like this and crying at everyone in his life. His mom squeezed him a little, and he wiped the tears away from his eyes.

“Why did you make Rozanov leave?” she asked, gently.

“So he could play. So he wouldn’t... hate me. I don’t know.”

Yuna inhaled a sharp gasp of breath. “He *said* that?”

Shane considered a moment. He supposed that Ilya had never directly expressed a desire to go play. But the bond had been so full of misery, and Shane didn’t know how else to interpret it. Then again, the bond was always full of emotions that he didn’t know how to interpret.

“No. Not exactly,” he admitted.

His mom sighed. “Okay,” she said. “Okay. I’ll pack you a bag. You just... hang tight, okay?”

All Shane could do was nod, simultaneously full of relief at someone else taking charge of the situation and mortification of being a 25-year-old man in this stupid fucking situation. But, well. Whatever would get him to Boston.

About fifteen minutes later, Yuna emerged from his bedroom with a neatly packed duffle bag, which was hardly surprising – his mom probably knew how to pack his bag better than he did, after years of prepping his overnight bags for hockey tournaments. His packing needs honestly hadn't changed that much since he was a kid, and even though it was a little embarrassing to have his mom grab stuff from his underwear drawer at this point, he was grateful for her help. He stood up from the couch with a quiet groan. He felt like he was wading through sludge.

He walked through the kitchen, and paused at the sight of the still-unsigned bond paperwork, sitting on the counter where Ilya had left it.

“Can you grab an empty folder from the office for me?” he asked his mom. “There’s something I have to do.”

By the time he got in the car, Shane did feel a little better. Not physically. He wasn't hungry at all, even though he hadn't managed to really eat all day. His entire body was aching, especially his head. But the bond, at least, wasn't crackling with electric discontent, like it somehow knew that he was on his way to Ilya.

His mom had been disconcertingly quiet as they started the drive to the Ottawa airport. She had bundled him into the car almost without another word, seemingly deep in thought. Shane buried himself in his hoodie and stared out the front window, until his mom unexpectedly broke the silence about half-an-hour into their drive.

“Did I ever tell you about the time that your father and I almost broke up?” she asked, which: what.

“What? No way. You guys are like... the perfect couple. You're *soulmates*.”

“It was before you were born,” she said. “Right when your father was introducing me to his parents, and they were... well. Less than supportive of his relationship with me. I was also so stressed about school, and about what this would mean for my life, that all your father could read through the bond was that stress and worry and panic. He was trying to break up with me for my own good, since he thought I wasn't happy with him.”

“Seriously? What happened?” Shane asked. He knew that his parents were sometimes perceived as a bit of an odd couple, and not even just when people were being racist assholes – his polished, glamorous mom with his boring, quiet dad. Still, he couldn't imagine them separated.

“We talked about it like adults, and realized that we didn't actually know what the other person was feeling. Or, sure, he knew what I was feeling, but he didn't know what was going on inside my head,” she said. “He didn't know *why* I was feeling what I was feeling, or what I wanted. And what I needed at that time was his support, and reassurance that this relationship was something worth fighting for.”

Shane looked down at his lap. There was so much that he wanted to say to Ilya. He had been thinking about it, as he contemplated inviting him to the cottage that summer, hoping that carving out a little bit of space and time would allow them to finally be honest with each other. But now they'd been to the cottage, and it didn't seem like they were any closer to understanding each other. Ilya's emotions were either too quick for him to track or so profoundly deep that he was scared to look at them too closely, like the insistent green that kept on blooming in the bond.

Yuna sighed. "Do you talk to him?" she asked, as if she was the one reading his mind.

"We're not... good at that. Really," he answered.

In his peripheral vision, Shane saw his mom nod like that didn't surprise her. "Do you want a future with him?" she asked.

Fuck. Shane couldn't meet her eyes, so he nodded again. "I love him," he said, and his voice was rough.

"Oh, honey," his mom said, reaching out to briefly touch his shoulder before turning back to the road.

"I haven't... told him that. Yet," Shane said. "I know I should. I will. I don't know why it's so hard, when we're... you know."

"Well, I'm sure he knows at least a little bit," she said. "Sometimes I wish I could see inside your head, Shane."

"I don't know if he knows," Shane said. "I mean. I have a hard time understanding what he's feeling, most of the time."

Yuna was quiet for a moment, long enough that it started to make Shane nervous. Was that wrong? Was there something wrong with their bond? But then she said, "Well. Even more reason to talk, even with the bond. Especially with the bond. If he's going to be your partner, your... your person, then you *have* to talk to him."

"Okay," Shane said. That was probably good advice. His mom's advice was usually right, even if it was also sometimes a little overwhelming.

"And I can't pretend I understand this yet, but I need you to know that I love you, no matter what," she continued.

Shane nodded again with a sharp jerk of his head. There were definitely tears welling in his eyes. He would not let them fall.

"I'm still angry with him for leaving you," she said.

"Mom," he said. "Please don't be. I made him go. It's my fault."

She pressed her lips together, looking like she wanted to argue, but then sighed and let it go.

“I’m sorry if I made this harder for you. That I made you feel like you couldn’t tell me,” she said, and now she sounded teary. Fuck. Shane hated it when his mom cried. She almost never did. He was also definitely crying, a little bit.

“I guess we haven’t been very good at talking either, eh?” she said.

“I guess not,” he said. “I’m sorry, mom.”

Yuna shook her head. “You don’t need to apologize. Not for this. We’ll... we’ll do better. I’ll do better. Forgive me?”

Shane shuddered a little bit at that, curling further into his seat. This would be too much on a good day, let alone when he already felt like he was about to fall apart into a million little puzzle pieces. Forgive his mom? For what, giving him everything he ever had? But there was some small, hurt part of his soul that felt the rightness of the request. He knew why she’d pushed. But she had also made him feel so sure that the world would fall apart if anyone ever found out that he was gay. If anyone found out that his soulmate was a man, that this wasn’t something that was going to go away.

“Okay, mom,” he said, pinching the tears out of his eyes. “I forgive you. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The rest of the car ride to the Ottawa airport was silent, except for the talk radio channel playing low in the background. Shane was grateful that he and his mother could still be quiet together. His body and his life both felt like they were falling apart, but at least this seemed relatively intact. That was something. That was a little relief.

The airport was exactly as awful as Shane predicted, hectic and even more overwhelming than usual. He pulled his hoodie back over his head as soon as he got through security and put his sunglasses back on even though it wasn’t particularly bright inside the airport. All he really wanted to do was crawl into a corner somewhere and hug his own body as tight as possible. His stomach was in knots, his head was throbbing in time with every heartbeat pounding against the front of his forehead, and his dexterous hockey-player hands felt unusually clumsy. He almost dropped his boarding pass trying to get onto the plane, avoiding the eyes of the flight attendant when she lit up at the name on his ticket.

There was a screaming baby sitting a few rows back in economy class, which made him even more grateful than usual for the luxury of business-class airplane tickets. He unwound his earbuds and put on the workout playlist that his trainer had made for him. He had no idea what songs he was listening to, but the bassline helped drown out the noise. The bond, at least, remained quiet as the plane took off and they were on their way to Boston, even though his head was still pounding.

He normally didn’t think business class was worth the extra money, although he always shelled out for extra legroom in economy. He was making millions now, but it would have to last for the rest of his life, and in a few years as an aging ex-hockey player, he wouldn’t have

endorsement deals or advertising campaigns to fall back on. They were at the top of their game *now*, which was why it was so important that he played, that *Ilya* played now. Careers as an athlete didn't last forever. Ilya had to play, and that meant that going to Boston was worth it. Being on the plane having his head rattled around by turbulence was worth it.

He thought of the soulbond paperwork sitting like a stone in his backpack, neat and protected in the folder from his office. He still hadn't filled it out. He had the time, on the plane, but also he was definitely going to get motion-sick if he didn't keep his eyes closed and his arms wrapped around his stomach. Just thinking about what the registration paperwork would mean already made him nauseous. The paperwork would create a record that tied them together for the rest of their lives. Even if they decided to break the bond someday, there would be even more paperwork. Their names, written together on a piece of paper, somewhere in a government office.

It wasn't until he landed in Boston that he realized that Ilya had no idea that he was on his way, and also that while he knew where Ilya lived, he had never been given the door code. He checked the time and the score of the game. Boston and New York were tied 2-2, five minutes into the third period.

He walked outside to the ground transportation. A taxi would probably be easiest, and certainly the most anonymous option. But where was he even going to go? He stood for a second, swaying a bit as the exhaust fumes concentrated in the pickup area made him feel even more light-headed. Fuck. He couldn't stop moving or he really was just going to crumple to the ground, disgusting pavement be damned.

Going to the apartment probably made the most sense. He could wait on the front stoop, if nothing else. Ilya probably had some kind of security system, although maybe not. That did seem like the kind of thing that Ilya would forget that he needed. Plus his apartment was relatively sheltered from prying eyes, so it seemed unlikely that Ilya would have nosy neighbors who might call the cops on him. Still, the game seemed likely to go into overtime, and then Ilya would need to cool down, shower, talk to the press, get changed, drive from the rink, park, and realize that Shane was here. It could be hours yet before they saw each other, and Shane's stomach flipped at that realization. With how bad he currently felt, he genuinely didn't know whether he could wait multiple hours until they were back in the same room. His vision was already swimming.

He picked up his phone and called Ilya, then immediately realized that Ilya was still on the ice for a playoff game and wouldn't be able to answer. He knew that, obviously. It was possible he wasn't quite in his right mind, at the moment. Hearing Ilya's obnoxious voice on his stupid voicemail message oddly made him feel a little better, so he called him again. Should he leave a voicemail, on the off chance that Ilya did listen to it before he showed up at the rink? No, probably not. He called Ilya one last time, listened to his voice on the voicemail one last time, then took a deep breath and gave up on trying to contact him.

Okay. Think, Hollander. He knew where Ilya was currently located: he was at the arena, playing a playoff game. He knew where the player entrance was from the many, many times he had played in Boston, and it would allow him to enter relatively discreetly, since the entrance was protected by an attached staff parking garage. He had no idea if they would let

him into the arena when he wasn't playing there to play in a game. Then again, there were times when it was useful to be *the* Shane Hollander, even though it was deeply embarrassing to pull that card.

Driving through Boston traffic in the back of a taxi did *not* help him feeling like he needed to throw up, especially with how badly the taxi smelled and how sticky the seats were, but at the very least, he arrived safely and anonymously at the rink. The cab driver thankfully seemed to speak very little English and had to be given the name of the arena twice before he understood where Shane wanted him to go, which was a good sign that he didn't give a shit about hockey or have any clue about Shane's identity. Shane left a generous tip.

He walked up to the gate at the front of the player parking garage and swallowed at the sight of security guards. He usually came to the arena in the team bus, and felt strangely small walking up to the rink as a pedestrian in a hoodie rather than a gameday suit. The building seemed more imposing than usual.

As he approached the entrance to the gated player garage, one of the security guards called to him, "Hey, man, no fans through here. Main entrance is that way."

Shane walked a little closer and pulled his hoodie off his head. He tried to look confident, and not like someone who was in very present danger of throwing up all over his shoes.

"Oh, shit," one of the men said, standing straight from where he had been leaning against a column. "Shane Hollander? What are you doing here?"

"I... uh. Sorry. Can I come in this way?"

The security guard squinted at him. "I mean... It would be helpful to know why you were here, so I know where to send you. But, sure. Not like I'm going to turn Shane Hollander away from a hockey rink. Unless you're here to sabotage us, of course."

"No, no," Shane said, trying to smile at the joke. "Nothing like that."

"Shit, man. Okay," the guard said, and opened the gate to let him into the mostly empty parking lot. Shane followed him mutely through the quiet parking lot, full with the cars of players and staff. He wondered if Ilya had driven, but didn't recognize any of the impractical and ludicrously colored sports cars from Ilya's collection. Maybe he had to take a car directly from the airport. He had been worried that Ilya wouldn't make it to the game at all, and that this whole escapade would have been for nothing. Soon enough, they came to the internal player entrance, where the security guard was easily waved through with Shane behind him.

"So who were you here to see again?" he asked Shane, as they stepped into the building. The guards at the door looked at him curiously, but let him pass without comment.

"Uh. I'm here to see... Rozanov," Shane said.

The guard paused and turned to look at him incredulously. "Seriously? I thought you guys hated each other. Is he... expecting you?"

“Yeah,” Shane lied.

“Ohh-kay,” the security guard said. “Well. Wait here, please. I’ll go see if he’s free.”

Shane stood in the hallway for what felt like an hour, but was probably about ten minutes. The game would be over by now, given the length of his cab ride, but he had no idea if Ilya would be able to come see him right away. He leaned back against the rough gray cinderblock wall when his legs started to feel weak underneath him, and tried to focus on anything other than the pounding of his head that matched his fingertips and his heartbeat. He ignored the curious looks from passers-by in the hallway, and kept his eyes trained on the ugly carpet design, tracing his way between the little colorful dots with his eyes.

Surprise and a dozen other emotions that passed by too quickly for Shane to process bloomed in the bond, and he looked up. Ilya was there, wide-eyed and confused, hair still wet from the shower and flushed with the exertion of the game. Beautiful. Was he mad at Shane? He thought about pulling on the bond to see, but his head already hurt. He was so glad that Ilya was here.

And then Ilya was right there, putting his big hands on Shane’s waist. Shane hadn’t realized how badly he was shaking until Ilya’s steady hands touched him.

“Shane?” Ilya asked. “What – I told you I come back. Why are you here?”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” Shane said, but in that moment, he wasn’t really sorry. The bond was singing with the physical contact between them, a long, resonant note. For the first time since he’d made Ilya walk away, Shane didn’t feel like he was about to throw up. The sudden lack of sensation after feeling so bad for so many hours was overwhelming in its own way, but he was so glad that he hadn’t waited. This was exactly what he’d needed.

“Oh. You feel nice,” Shane said, then leaned forward until his head was resting against Ilya’s shoulder. He sank into Ilya’s warmth and let himself drift, dizzy with profound relief.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Annie for looking this over!

Drop a favorite line in the comments if you have one.

Chapter 6: Home

Chapter Notes

hello, party people

first, I am thrilled to say that this fic! has! fanart!! [please go give lunarblue11 some love!!](#)

second, thanks once again to the brilliant Annie for the beta read, and for reminding me about Shane's broken collarbone! (rip)

third, thank you all for the reception to this fic!! this is the chapter I've been most excited for this entire time, and based on your comments, I think it might be a shared feeling. So. Go hog wild.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The security guard who had come to fetch him from the locker room was staring at them as Shane remained slumped against him in the hallway. Ilya recognized Stacy from the social media team standing about twenty feet down the hall with her mouth agape, not even pretending not to stare. Ilya looked at the security guard's identification badge, since the man was unfamiliar to him. His name was Juan.

"Uh," he said. "Juan. Can we have a room?"

"Uhhhh. Yes. Sure, man," Juan said, and visibly shook himself as he regrouped his professionalism. Ilya didn't blame him. "Um. I think the trainer's room down the hall might be free."

"Thank you," Ilya said, and gently guided Shane so that Shane had one arm thrown over Ilya's shoulders and Ilya had an arm firmly slung around his waist. The bond was still full of warm gratitude and relief. Fuck. How had Shane managed to get from the cottage to Boston if he was feeling this badly? How had he gotten to the airport, for that matter, since Ilya had taken the only car? Most likely he had simply invented a form of teleportation that instantly transported him to the hockey rink of his choice. It seemed only logical.

"Do you need help?" Juan asked, as they began walking down the hall, Ilya steering Shane like an unwieldy ship.

"M'okay," Shane slurred. "I can walk."

"Shut up, Hollander," Ilya said.

Juan unlocked the door to the trainer's room with one of the keys on his belt ring, then helpfully opened the door so that Ilya could maneuver Shane inside. He helped Shane up onto the padded table in the middle of the room, intended for physical therapy sessions or sports massage. Shane slumped as soon as he was seated, eyes half-closing, although he kept his good hand on Ilya at all times. They probably weren't being particularly subtle.

Juan was still standing there, hovering. Ilya met his eyes, and nodded at him. "Thank you," he repeated. The man had done a kind thing with very few questions, which was a quality that Ilya could appreciate. Maybe he should arrange a bonus for the security staff this year.

"Of course," Juan replied, and thankfully took the cue to head towards the door. "The door will lock automatically when you leave. Just let rink security know if you're going to be in the building for more than an hour or so, okay? Don't want to lock you in."

Ilya nodded, and then Juan was high-tailing it out of the room. Fuck. Ilya should probably get him to sign an NDA, but right now all he wanted to do was sink into his soulmate's body and see if it would make his headache go away. And, well. Now that that thought had occurred, there wasn't a compelling reason not to follow it.

He stepped in between Shane's legs, wrapped his arms around the other man's shoulders while carefully avoiding the broken collarbone, and buried his face in Shane's neck. The other man smelled like he had just gotten off a plane, and he was still a little clammy with sweat. The hug was perfect anyway, with the bond warm and singing in pleasure at their proximity. Shane still felt so relieved to be in his presence, and Ilya hadn't even *done* anything. The realization made him swallow around a sudden lump of emotion in his throat.

"Sorry," Shane said again, as he raised a hand to tap patterns absently on Ilya's back. He didn't seem up to saying much else. Ilya shook his head into Shane's neck and squeezed as hard as he dared.

"Did you win?" Shane asked. Typical. Of course he felt up to discussing hockey after traveling across an international border while concussed and with a broken collarbone.

Ilya snorted. "No. We didn't win, because I *also* feel like shit."

"Oh," Shane said. "Sorry."

Ilya pulled back from the embrace, although he stayed right between Shane's legs, which was always his favorite place to be. "You are trying to set Canadian record?"

"What?"

"Most apologies in hour. I would say world record, but a Canadian would obviously win. This is what you are trying to do?"

"Fuck off."

He raised his arm to run a gentle hand down Shane's cheekbone, the same cheekbone where he had rested his hand in the hospital after the concussion. How was it possible that they had

only been apart for a matter of hours, and still he had missed him? Shane Hollander made him mushy. It was deeply unfortunate that he could also see inside Ilya's head and probably knew this. A tragedy, really.

Ilya's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and stared at the screen. His coach was calling, probably because he was supposed to be on his way to an emergency meeting with management, rather than wrangling a partially catatonic Shane Hollander. Well, there was nothing for it. He already had fines for missing games, and under any other circumstances besides game three of the playoffs and a mysterious soulmate emergency, he would have been scratched for missing so many commitments. Management would have to wait a little longer. They wouldn't be happy, but if the Bears lost one more game, the season would be over anyway. What could they do? It might cost him down the line, but for now, they needed him.

Ilya had to get Shane out of here, the sooner the better. The only problem was that he had taken an uber from the airport directly to the rink, since he didn't have time to go home and get his own car. They could potentially take an uber or taxi back to his apartment, but there was a high risk of being recognized, especially with the two of them together. On any other day, if he didn't feel like getting an uber, he would ask one of his teammates to drop him home. Cliff lived in the same neighborhood. But explaining why he and Shane Hollander were attached at the hip seemed like an adventure for another day.

Well. There was one other option, even if it would definitely get him yelled at. He unlocked his phone and called Svetlana.

"You played well, but not fully like yourself. Have you told him you love him?" Svetlana asked as soon as she picked up, thankfully in Russian that Shane would not understand, even with his head so close to the phone.

"No, but—" he started, but Svetlana had already hung up the phone. He looked at his phone in disbelief for a second.

"Who was that?" Shane asked.

"Our ride."

"Oh. They hung up?"

"Shh."

Ilya called Svetlana again.

"I told you not to call me until you sort things out with your lover boy," she said. "I was not kidding. What do you want?"

"It's an emergency!" he protested.

She stayed on the line, at least, which was reassuring. She still loved him. "Fine. I am listening."

“I need a ride home from the arena.”

“Ah. And this is an emergency, and my problem, because...”

“Because I need to get Shane back to my apartment without giving a random uber driver the scoop of the century,” he said.

She was silent for a second, and he could feel nerves building on Shane’s end of the bond. He’d probably recognized his name and felt Ilya’s rising ire in the bond, even if he couldn’t understand the words that were being said. All of this stress was definitely not good for either of their blood pressure. Thankfully they were both young, hot, professional athletes, so he did not need to worry about such things.

“...Shane Hollander is here? In Boston?” Svetlana said, and there was something ominous about the glee in her voice. Ilya winced.

“Sveta. He’s not feeling well. Will you please come?” he said, trying to sound stern. It definitely wasn’t going to work on her, but he felt like he had to try.

“Oh, I am already on my way,” she said, which... meant that Shane and Svetlana would be meeting each other. Fuck. He had now met many people from Shane’s life, as Shane’s soulmate, but this would be the first important person from *his* life who knew. Svetlana seeing his dick was no big deal, but the thought of his oldest friend watching him be disgustingly in love with Shane Hollander? Maybe a taxi was a better idea after all.

However, she was already on her way. Admitting that he didn’t know how to face her would be far worse. He dropped his head back into the crook of Shane’s shoulder and breathed in his sticky-airplane scent until he felt steadier.

Being back in Ilya’s presence was like looking into a mirror in the bathroom when drunk: the sudden clarity made Shane realize how clouded his thinking had been, how irrational it had been to fly all the way to Boston and come to the rink, of all places. He’d messed up. People would know, now. People like the security guard who had let him into the rink. Had there been people in the hallway? Probably. He had been too out of it to notice.

Still, he couldn’t bring himself to regret it too badly yet, while they were still ensconced in this little private room. Ilya was still standing in the open cradle of his legs, a hand on either thigh, his head against Shane’s shoulder as they breathed together. The bond was open, emotions molten and quick-flowing, and the green feeling was overwhelming from Ilya’s end of the bond. For once, instead of worrying about what it meant, Shane allowed himself to sink into it and breathe.

It felt like peace. Like Ilya had created a space in his head where Shane could fully relax his body, where he could drop the tension in his shoulders. A place where it didn’t matter if Shane didn’t know what to do with his hands, where he could sit quietly and feel the breeze on his cheeks, sheltered by the thick trees that whispered around him. A place of growing things, somewhere he could also grow. If he didn’t know better, he’d say it felt like—

Ilya abruptly pulled away from his body in order to check his buzzing phone, and Shane did his best not to pout as he was pulled out of the bond and back into his own aching body. "Svetlana is here," Ilya said, and Shane let him pull him off the table and guide him, a hand on his back.

They made it halfway to the exit before anyone stopped them or tried to talk to them. A team staffer in office clothes came running down the hallway, calling Ilya's name, but Ilya kept walking and barely acknowledged his existence. Shane thought that was a little rude, and tugged at Ilya's shirt to make him slow down.

"Rozanov, are you trying to leave?" the man said. "Uh. Sorry. Is that Shane Hollander?"

"What do you want?" Ilya said, still walking forward with his arm firmly wrapped around Shane's waist. He tripped a little, and Ilya's arm tightened around him. They kept moving.

"You're supposed to be in a meeting. Like right now," the man said, gesturing vaguely behind him and speed-walking to keep up with their pace down the hallway.

"Okay," Ilya said. "Well. They cannot have meeting without me. So we will reschedule. Now I am busy, go away."

Shane winced. He really had messed up by coming to the rink. Ilya was missing *meetings* because of him, as well as games. Maybe they could still go to the meeting, and Shane would... wait in the hallway? He certainly wouldn't be allowed in the room with Boston management, but if they'd sent someone to find Ilya, then this was clearly important.

"Rozanov," he started, conscious of their audience, but Ilya didn't miss a step as he steered them towards the exit.

"Hollander. No time for feeling guilty," Ilya said. "We have to go."

The staffer had dropped back in bewilderment, and although the security guards also looked confused at the sight of them, they let their captain (and Montreal's captain to boot) pass without comment, heads swiveling as they marched through the door. In the player garage, a dark, sleek luxury sedan was idling as close to the door as possible, and Ilya walked up to the back seat and opened the door without hesitation, pouring Shane and himself into the car.

A beautiful woman who must be Svetlana was sitting in the driver's seat. She turned back to observe them as they slid into the backseat and Ilya pulled the door shut behind him. Shane worked on buckling his seatbelt, trying not to feel self-conscious. Of course Shane was meeting Svetlana under these circumstances, when everyone kept telling him that he looked like shit, and she was exactly as stunning as he'd imagined and apparently a hockey expert. Ilya's perfect woman.

"Shane Hollander," Svetlana said, and she somehow gave the impression that she was looking at him over the rim of cool sunglasses, even though it was night and she wasn't wearing sunglasses. "I have been waiting a very long time for this."

Ilya, blatantly disregarding seat belt safety, slid closer to him until their entire bodies were pressed together, Ilya's hand landing on his knee. Suddenly Shane didn't mind his own

appearance quite as much.

“Hi,” Shane said. “Uh. Nice to meet you?”

She smiled. She really was objectively stunning, even though he was very gay, but there was a hint of a predatory gleam on the edge of her smile. Shane was afraid he was about to find out why.

Svetlana was driving much more carefully than she usually did, which Ilya appreciated. She usually treated city driving like a competitive sport, jockeying through traffic in ways that sometimes scared even him. What he didn't appreciate were the assessing looks that she kept leveling at Shane in the rearview mirror. He knew that look, and it always brought trouble. Shane looked a little better with every passing minute they spent together, but he was fidgeting with the cuffs on his hoodie, and the bond was full of his nerves and guilt.

“So, Shane,” Svetlana said as they sat at a red light. Boston traffic was a nightmare at the best of times, let alone on a Friday night with lingering traffic from the game. They were proceeding at a crawl through the city's winding streets.

“Don't interrogate him,” Ilya said in Russian. “He came to Boston because we should not have been separated yet. My fault for leaving.”

Svetlana ignored him and continued in English. “I have always wanted to meet you, you know. And then, last week, I find out something very interesting.”

“Yeah?” Shane said.

“This one calls me on the phone. Says he cannot leave Canada because you are bonded,” Svetlana continued.

Shit. Ilya had not told Shane yet that he had told Svetlana. Shane seemed to be taking it relatively in stride. They had revealed facets of their relationship to so many people over the past few weeks, what was one more?

“Uh. Yeah,” Shane said. “That's true. We're bonded.”

“Hmm. But not together. Not boyfriends.”

“Sveta,” Ilya said, a warning. Shane said nothing, but Ilya could feel him starting to panic in the bond.

“Well,” Svetlana said. “It perhaps not my place to do this, but no one else will. So. What are your intentions with my Ilya?”

“Svetlana! What, are you negotiating my dowry?” Ilya objected in Russian.

“If I have to,” she replied haughtily, then switched back to English. “So?”

The bond flared with emotions from Shane's side. He was still keeping the connection relatively open, and Ilya didn't know whether that was by choice or a lingering side effect of the concussion. But the openness between them meant that he could appreciate everything Shane was feeling at that moment. The panic was there, as well as indecision and guilt, but so was *love, devotion, longing*.

Ilya watched Shane, wanting to hear his response even though it had perhaps been a little unfair of Svetlana to spring this on him. Without the bond, he would have so little idea what Shane was feeling. Almost nothing of the emotions that he was experiencing played out across his face. He felt an unexpected wave of gratitude for their bond. How else would he know that Shane was in love with him, when his face gave so little away besides the nervous bite of his lip, the flick of his eyes as he struggled to think of an answer?

"I... um," Shane said. "My intentions?"

"Yes."

"Uh. I don't—I mean. I intend to stay bonded to him, if that's what you're getting at. And, um. I'm not trying to hurt him. Or his career. This whole situation has just been... a bit of a mess."

"Yes. And?" Svetlana asked, sharp.

"And... what?"

"What about the future? When there is no more hockey to play?"

"Like when we retire? I mean. That won't be for a while, yet, but. I guess we'll figure it out, won't we? We'll... I don't know."

Svetlana considered this as the light turned green and they started moving forward again. Ilya considered too, the contrast between the words that Hollander spoke and the things that he felt in the bond. They had promised nothing more to each other. *We* figuring out what *we* want sounded like something more, like a relationship. But he still felt a flicker of annoyance, at Shane but also at himself.

Hollander felt so much. Ilya hadn't fully realized, until the concussion, how deep his feelings ran, but now that he knew, they seemed impossible to ignore. His own feelings also seemed more difficult to ignore. They couldn't be together in any kind of proper way, couldn't announce it to the world. But, well. So many people already knew, and the world had not ended. He had so little reason to go back to Russia, now. They were about to tell their teams, assuming that Shane had finally signed the fucking paperwork. Why could they do all this, but they could not come up with a better answer for the future than *I don't know*?

Then again, it wasn't like he had any answers either.

"That will do for now, Shane Hollander," Svetlana said after a moment, and then was distracted by swearing at a driver who had cut her off. Middle fingers were exchanged, as traditional for Boston traffic conflicts, and they continued crawling on their way.

Ilya dropped his head against Shane's shoulder, still chewing over Shane's answer to Svetlana but unable to resist the temptation and the privacy that the tinted windows afforded them. Shane shifted to press their bodies closer and leaned his head against Ilya's, and while he didn't say anything, the bond glowed. They stayed like that for the remainder of the car ride.

It wasn't until they had stumbled into Ilya's apartment after profusely thanking Svetlana for acting as a chauffeur that Shane was able to decipher something from Ilya's end of the bond besides the warm contentment of being reunited. Ilya was angry, he realized, and growing angrier. He supposed that made sense. Shane had shown up at the rink, probably embarrassed him, made him miss meetings, made him call in a favor with a friend just to get home.

"I'm sorry," he said as soon as they had waved goodbye to Svetlana and gotten through Ilya's door. He knew that Ilya would tease him for it but was unable to come up with anything else.

"World record?" Ilya responded, sure enough.

"Fuck off. I know. I just... I can feel that you're angry. I shouldn't have come to the rink."

Ilya snorted. "That is not why I'm angry."

"But you *are* angry."

"Yes."

"Okay, so, what then?"

Ilya said something in Russian that sounded like an insult complicated enough to make Shane blush, if he was capable of understanding it. "You tell me to go. Tell me you're fine. Lie to my face and say you don't want me there. And then you fly here anyway, get on a plane like this, and you show up at the arena, and you are shaking. Look like shit."

"Okay? Sorry if I look like shit. So what?"

"You are always pretty, Hollander. Can look like shit and still be pretty," Ilya corrected, then continued, "It is not only that. The things you say in the bond and the things you say out loud don't match. Make no sense."

It had been an exhausting day. Shane felt like he had lived fourteen lives since he woke up this morning. He had been in the airport, he had felt like he was about to throw up or die the entire time he was on his way to Boston, and now his fucking soulmate was being an asshole, and he had had *enough*.

"I don't make sense? *You* don't make sense!"

"I make sense," Ilya said, shrugging off his jacket and walking towards the kitchen. Shane followed close behind him.

“No, you don’t! You have all of these emotions going on, all the time, and half of them don’t make any sense to me! Like, why is your head full of green stuff?” he asked, wincing as he did, but the cat was out of the bag.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Green stuff? I do not have green stuff in my head,” Ilya said, pulling open the refrigerator door with more force than necessary. Shane got the sense that he was just trying to avoid eye contact, and Shane was sick and tired of wondering.

“Yes, you do! All the fucking time! What is that?”

Ilya gave up on the fridge and pulled a bottle of vodka from the freezer and a glass from the cabinet. He leaned back against the counter and poured. “I do not know what you are talking about,” he said, clipped.

“You know! You have to know, it’s been there forever. The green thing! It feels like... growing stuff. I don’t know.”

“Green like growing stuff...” Ilya said, then went very quiet for a moment that stretched too long for Shane’s comfort. “Hollander. You cannot mean – this? Is it this?”

Then the bond was full of green, clearer and more vibrant than Shane had ever felt it before. What was once a few mushrooms and some moss on the side of a rock had grown into a lush forest, an infinitely complex ecosystem that felt borderless and eternal. Shane let himself slip back into that feeling for a brief moment, before pulling himself fully into the conversation with Ilya. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes! That. What the fuck is that?”

“Oh my god, Hollander,” Ilya said, and his eyes were wide.

“Don’t be condescending, asshole. Not now.” Shane was starting to feel a little stupid at Ilya’s reaction, like he had missed a step in the conversation and was only now realizing that he had gotten it wrong.

“No, I- are you saying you do not know?”

“No, I don’t,” Shane said, doubling down. He had to know, now. No backing down. “So maybe you should fucking tell me.”

Ilya rounded the counter and walked up to him. There was something gentle and a little scared in his eyes, and a corresponding disbelief still flooding the bond.

“Shane,” he said. “That is me being in love with you. I am... fuck, I am *so* fucking in love with you.”

Oh. “What?”

Ilya scrubbed a hand over his face, still looking at him with wide eyes. “You are inside my head! How do you not know this!”

“It’s not my fault that your emotions don’t make any sense!” Shane replied. “Do my emotions make any sense to you?”

“Of course they do! You are in love with me too!” Ilya said, then paused.

Shane was shaking again. He was, of course, but he didn’t know that he’d been that obvious. He didn’t even know *when* he’d fallen, when the begrudging attraction had turned into something so much deeper. Had Ilya known that Shane was in love with him before Shane knew himself? Sure, he wasn’t the best at emotions, but that would be a new low point, even for him. He looked down at the floor, overwhelmed, and debated the merits of sinking through it.

Ilya swore under his breath in Russian, then continued, “You sort of... yell at me through bond, when you were on painkillers. I think you do not mean to share everything, but you do.”

“Fuck,” he whispered. But, well. Ilya was in love with him too. He probably *was* a little stupid, to not have recognized his feelings for what they were. Holy shit, *Ilya was in love with him too*.

“Is okay, Shane. Promise,” Ilya said, and reached out to grab his hand and squeeze it gently.

“I *am* in love with you,” Shane said, looking back up into Ilya’s hazel eyes.

“I know.”

“Since when? When did you know?” he asked, needing to know just how badly he had embarrassed himself.

“Only since concussion. Before that, you keep everything locked tight.”

“Yeah, I... yeah. I had to. I thought I had to. But. You’re in love with me?”

Ilya looked at him for a moment, searching. Shane had no idea what he could feel through the bond. Then Ilya smiled, the kind of goofy, wide-open smile that Shane had only seen break through on a few rare occasions. Ilya closed his eyes, and began to push a feeling through the bond. Shane closed his eyes too, trying to understand. Concentrating like this, it felt like he was standing in the middle of the forest, with his feet buried in the moss that felt verdant and alive beneath his toes. The trees were growing up around him, towering over his head, and the forest was alive with the pulsing of a living heart beneath it all, manifested in the wind and the growth of the tiny white flowers blooming under his feet.

“Oh,” Shane said, opening his eyes again. His voice cracked, and he realized he was crying. “Is that what that is? It’s so big.”

Ilya was still smiling at him, but there were also tears in his eyes. “Is not the only thing that’s big,” he said, which somehow didn’t ruin the moment.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” Shane said. “You’re in love with me?”

“I’m in love with you. Now come here.”

They crashed together, trading desperate kisses that felt endless, barely pausing for breath. The bond stayed open between them as they stumbled their way through Ilya's apartment, knocking over a lamp and banging their hips and toes on the hard edges of Ilya's modern apartment, without separating even for a moment. His collarbone hurt when it was jostled, even though he could tell that Ilya was trying to be gentle with him, but he wanted this too much to care. Shane was laughing, he realized, and the bond between them was bright with joy and so much love that he couldn't believe he'd never recognized it before. He was still laughing as Ilya pressed him down into the bed, and Ilya was grinning back, helpless, and then they didn't need to say anything for a very long time, and the bond was the incandescent gold of a rising sun.

Later— much later— they lay tangled in bed, Ilya carefully sprawled on top of Shane, hiding his face in Shane's neck on the side opposite the broken collarbone. Shane pressed absent kisses to his forehead, his eyebrow, the corner of his eye, wherever he could reach. The fingers of his good arm were tangled in Ilya's hair, wrecking the pattern of his curls. The bond was quiet now, as if the sheer amount of emotion they had transmitted had overloaded the connection. Perhaps, too, they had finally said out loud the things that the bond had been trying to tell them all along.

Ilya turned his head to the side and pressed an absent kiss in the hollow of Shane's throat. "I cannot believe you didn't know," he said.

Shane considered this. He was a little embarrassed, but it was hard to sustain that emotion when it had brought him Ilya, pliant and splayed out across his chest like there was nowhere else in the world he would rather be.

"I think I did know, a little bit," he said. "Maybe I just didn't let myself understand it fully."

"Ah," Ilya said. "Yes. Is scary."

"Can you show me again?" Shane asked.

Ilya obliged, and smiled at the wash of green through the bond. There were other emotions lurking on the edges, though, that still felt more like transient flashes of colorful light than emotions he could interpret. Maybe it was time to be brave. Well. Braver than he'd been already. Fuck, today had been exhausting.

"Can you show me something else?" he asked anyway.

"Something else? Love got boring already?" Ilya asked.

"Never," Shane said, and he felt Ilya gulp at the fierce sincerity. "But I want to understand you better. So. Something else. Another emotion?"

Ilya remained quiet on his chest for a moment, and then the bond was streaked with pink. Shane tried to pin it down, but that was the only description he could find.

“What’s that?” Shane asked.

“Irritation. I imagine I am stuck behind slow Hayden Pike when skating, very easy.”

“Fuck off.”

Shane considered. Some of Ilya’s emotions had always been easy to interpret. He didn’t need to ask for a demonstration on what Ilya’s arousal felt like, he didn’t think, although a shiver slid down his spine at the thought. Okay. That was a thought to revisit later. This was a tender moment, and a breakable one, with Ilya usually open and vulnerable on top of him. What did he really want to know?

“Hatred?” he asked.

Ilya shifted restlessly on top of him. “Why do you want to feel that?” he asked.

Shane shrugged, trying to play it casual. “Just wondering.”

Again, Ilya thought for a moment, and then the bond was full of a bright cyan, a brittle color that was hard to look at directly.

“Huh,” Shane said. “What did you think about that time?”

“Worst teams in NHL. Full of assholes. You know. Like Montreal.”

“Fuck off, you did not.”

Shane was quiet for a moment, trying to sort through the vehemence of Ilya’s feelings. He was tempted to pull on the bond a little, to try and see what Ilya was really thinking about, but he supposed that could still be private if Ilya wanted. They hadn’t chosen this, hadn’t signed up to give each other 24/7 access to each other’s heads. Still, he was thinking of Vegas, of the emotion that had felt like a grayish navy blue, but Shane had still interpreted it as hatred at the time.

“In Vegas, I really thought you hated me,” Shane said, without really meaning to.

Ilya shifted, raising his head to look at him. “Hate you? I could never.”

“Oh, never? Better alert the press.”

Ilya gently bit at his chin with a playful snap of his teeth. “Ah, ah, I am funny guy here. Don’t get ideas.”

Shane shoved him away, equally gentle. He wanted an answer, though for the morbid curiosity that had lingered since that night. “I felt hatred, though. I was pretty sure about that one.”

Ilya shifted. “I hate myself, I think. Tell myself to stay away from you, keep bond closed, and then I am fucking you anyway. Can’t stay away.”

“Oh,” Shane said. “Me either.”

Ilya grinned at him like a loon. “Okay, okay. What else do you want to feel? Bring it, Hollander.”

Then Ilya was tickling him by running a hand lightly up his side, and Shane protested and pretended to try and shake him off despite the way his collarbone protested, so the emotions game was over. Ilya suddenly flopped back down onto Shane’s good shoulder, letting his whole body go limp and his weight press Shane down into the mattress. “Fucking get off me, Rozanov,” he said through his laughter, but he didn’t mean a word of it, and he knew that Ilya could read that perfectly, bond or no bond.

Later yet, when they had eaten and completed another round of sex, they tucked themselves back into Ilya’s blue sheets, Ilya lounging and Shane sitting upright, staring at the ceiling. “What are we going to do?” Shane asked the room at large.

Ilya looked over at him, at his arms crossed over his chest, and sighed. They had gotten about an hour of Hollander not overthinking anything, which was honestly more than Ilya ever thought he’d get, but it was an uncomfortable reminder that finally finding the words to discuss their feelings had not magically resolved all of their problems.

“I don’t know,” Ilya said. “We have to tell teams, have to register the bond, but maybe it will be okay. Things will not change that much. Did you bring paperwork?”

Shane turned to look at him, and now he looked like an angry kitten again. The bond was full of disbelief. “Are you serious?” he asked.

Ilya was unsure where this conversation had gone wrong. They had been communicating so well, he thought. “What? You did not bring paperwork?”

Turning onto his side, Shane rolled to face him, eyes searching Ilya’s own. “You’re going to tell me that you’re in love with me and expect that not to change things? Really?”

That did sound a little stupid, now that Hollander had said it out loud. Still, Ilya didn’t see a way out of most of their problems. Okay, yes, they loved each other. Big news. Were they going to announce a press conference?

He decided that thought deserved to be heard. “Okay, so what. You want to tell everybody? Big press conference tomorrow?”

“No, of course not,” Shane said. “But I think... I want to start planning. Thinking. About how we can be together.”

Oh. Somehow in the middle of the ecstatic love confessions and frankly mind-blowing sex that had ensued, Ilya had never considered that might be something that was on the table. It sounded so simple, stated like that. *Being together*. A luxury they had never had, time. Even

in the days since Shane's injury, they had been unable to be apart, but that wasn't the same as being *together*.

Ilya was mortified to find that he was blinking tears out of his eyes. "You are serious?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You want this? To be together?"

A gentle smile curved on Shane's face, and he was beautiful, and Ilya loved him. "So much. So much it scares me."

"Okay."

"Okay, fine. We plan. We register the bond. Tell our teams. See what happens," Shane said.

"Okay."

Unable to cope with the eye contact any longer, Ilya rolled over and buried his face in Shane's neck again. "What do we do first?" he asked Shane's unbroken collarbone.

Shane thought for a long second, his arm absently tracing up and down Ilya's bare back. "I think we need to call my mom."

Ilya choked on a laugh. Of course. What else? "Okay," he said, and let himself sink.

Chapter End Notes

à la streetcar named desire svetlanaaaaaaaaa

Chapter 7: The World

Chapter Notes

alright, that's enough fucking around. time for the finding out!

thanks once again to Annie, who looked this over even though she's sick. very brave.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Later in the evening after their conversation, once things were finally settled between them, Ilya sat back against the headboard of his bed with Shane peacefully asleep beside him. Shane's face was pressed against his hip, his arm curled possessively around Ilya's bare thigh, and Ilya was running his hands lazily through Shane's soft hair.

He normally would step out to the hallway to make a phone call, but he couldn't move without dislodging Shane, and waking him felt as impossible as disturbing a sleeping puppy on his lap. So he picked up his phone and turned down the volume, before opening his contacts to dial his most-called number.

"You were right," he said quietly in Russian as soon as Svetlana picked up. It was late, but he knew she would be awake.

"I know so," she replied.

"Thank you, Sveta."

"Hmm. Maybe next time it will not take you so long to listen to my advice."

"Eh. Maybe."

He thought Svetlana might hang up on him again, but instead she hummed into the phone, as she did when she was amused and a little tired.

"Goodnight, Ilyusha," she said. "Be good to each other."

Ilya smiled. "We will. Goodnight."

Shane watched the fourth game of the Bears' series against the Admirals from the comfort of Ilya's couch, with his parents on video call from their home in Ottawa so they could still watch the game together to some extent. Ilya had offered to smuggle him into the arena and hide him in the press box, but he'd refused the invitation, even though it wouldn't make much of a difference at this point, really. Showing up at the rink as he did had sent rumors

swirling through the Bears' organization, and there was only so long that Ilya could continue to avoid their questions.

The meeting with Bears management that Shane had inadvertently interrupted was happening today, after the game. Ilya hadn't seemed all that nervous about it, all things considered, but Shane was distracted from the game by considering all the possible paths that the meeting could take. Ilya had one year left on his contract and a strong no-trade clause, but these were literally unprecedented circumstances. Who knew what could happen?

"Ooh! That looked like cross-checking to me, I wonder if they'll call it—oh, bullshit," his mom said over their video call.

"Yeah," he said, trying to stop bouncing his leg and not succeeding. He had picked up the habit from Ilya at some point, he thought. His nervous habit had always been chewing on his hoodie strings.

"Shane? Are you okay?" his mom asked.

"Huh? Oh. I'm fine," he said.

"Usually takes quite a lot to distract you from hockey," his dad said, which was true. Again, literally unprecedented circumstances.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Uh. Just a little tired, I think."

"The meeting will be fine, honey," his mom said. "They would be stupid to let go of their captain over this. He's the face of the franchise!"

"That's true, but. He's been missing games. Missing practice. And I think the guys on the team are getting kind of frustrated. They have to be able to trust their captain, or none of this works."

It certainly didn't help that it looked like the Bears were about to be swept out of the first round of the playoffs in four games. Boston was down 1-3 against the Admirals towards the end of the second period, and Ilya was playing with bruised ribs from a nasty check into the boards at the beginning of the first period, a hit that had made Shane and his parents wince as the television announcers exclaimed about how *that* must hurt. Shane thought he could feel his ribs throbbing in sympathy, but at this distance he was probably imagining it. Transferred body sensation through bonds was incredibly rare, only present in the strongest connections.

Getting knocked out of the playoffs in four games hurt, but to be fair, Ilya had only been present for half of them, and hockey was supposed to be a fucking team sport. Fuck, did his ribs hurt. His side had already been blooming red when he looked at his ribs in the shower, and he hissed when he experimentally tried pressing his fingers into the irritated spot.

His teammates were largely giving him the cold shoulder. Men he'd played with for years, sweat and bled with for years, unable to look him in the eye. The locker room was always a

somber place after getting knocked out for the season, but usually Ilya would be hamming it up, trying to lift the mood and inspire a little bit of levity ahead of the summer. Not today. He wasn't in the mood, and he didn't think anyone wanted to hear it, anyway. Two of their d-men were whispering as they stole glances across him from across the room. Only Marlow had shown any kind of support, but even that was a simple, silent clap on the shoulder.

Now he was showered and dressed, having fulfilled his media responsibilities for the few reporters who were in their subdued locker room instead of New York's no-doubt boisterous one. There would be many videos circulating of elderly Scott Hunter, saying inane things about how they were proud of what they'd accomplished but they still had a long way to go. *Boring*. He stared at his stall. Locker room cleanout wasn't until next week, and the equipment managers would handle most of his gear. Their season was over.

The same staffer who had tried to chase Ilya down in the hallway when he was leaving with Shane stood directly behind his stall, waiting for him. Management wasn't taking any chances this time. Ilya smirked a little at the thought – did they think he needed a minder so he wouldn't make a break for it? He'd like to think that he'd earned a little more professional credibility than that, at this point, but apparently not.

“Rozanov, you ready?” the staffer asked – Brian, Ilya thought his name was. He was some low-level staffer in the front office who had always inexplicably annoyed him, since he joined the organization the previous season. Brian looked at the players with an ambitious gleam in his eye, like they were chess pieces rather than people. Like he thought he could make everything better if he was the one in charge and could arrange everything to his fancy. Like he thought himself better than the players because he had a fancy college degree.

Ilya sighed, then grabbed the blue plastic folder out of his stall. Shane had handed it to him on his way out the door this morning, with an oddly shy kiss for good luck. The folder contained photocopies of the soulbond paperwork that Shane had finally signed yesterday. Shane had made four sets of photocopies at a random copy store in Ilya's neighborhood, scandalized by the fact that Ilya didn't own a printer.

The originals were ready to bring back to Canada to file at their in-person appointment in Montreal next week, once they had been reviewed by the lawyer that Yuna had found for them and notarized. Shane had also insisted that they needed their own photocopies, “for our records.” Ilya didn't have records so much as a random pile of paperwork thrown in a drawer, but if he left Shane to his own devices in his house for much longer, he assumed that would be changing soon. The final two sets of copies were meant for each of their teams.

He mutely followed Brian out of the locker room and through the hallways of the arena, wishing that Shane would appear around a corner and provide him with an excuse to avoid this meeting once again. It didn't seem likely, this time, but he could always hope for deliverance.

They entered the portion of the arena that housed the team offices, walked past the front desk towards the main meeting rooms, and found Mikhail, Ilya's agent, waiting for them in the hallway.

“Ilya, finally,” he said in Russian, then cut a look to Brian beside him. “Could we have a minute before we go in, please?” he asked in lightly accented English. Brian did not look pleased, but he also did not object as he walked into the boardroom ahead of them.

Mikhail was a middle-aged expat who represented a number of Russian players in the NHL, including Ilya since the beginning of his career. Ilya didn’t mind him, all things considered – he’d certainly negotiated a generous contract with the Bears. He had also reacted with a surprising amount of understanding when Ilya had informed him that he would be missing games for a soulmate-related emergency and slipped in the fact that his soulmate was a man. It was just, well. Ilya had perhaps neglected to mention the *precise* identity of his soulmate.

“So. I’m assuming that’s the paperwork?” Mikhail asked, switching back to Russian.

Ilya nodded and handed over the folder without a word. He watched Mikhail’s expression carefully as he opened the folder and began to scan through the documents inside, eyes visibly widening as he took in both of their names, printed side by side in Shane’s careful handwriting and Ilya’s lazy scrawl.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Mikhail said.

“Is there a problem?” Ilya asked, folding his hands in front of himself in an instinct born from facing his father’s scrutiny, one he’d never quite managed to suppress.

Mikhail looked at him incredulously. “You told me that your soulmate was a man. I said, okay, no problem, we can handle this. I’ve lived here for a long time too, you know. Maybe we need to find you a new agent if the news breaks, because I still have family in Russia that I would like to visit, and I will pretend to be scandalized, whatever. I have worked with you for so many years, I thought, okay, as a favor. But for some fucking reason, you neglected to mention that your soulmate is *Shane* fucking *Hollander*.”

For the last words, conscious of their surroundings, Mikhail’s voice had dropped down to a furious whisper.

Ilya thumbed at his nose, trying not to shuffle on his feet like a child. “What does it matter?” he asked.

Mikhail shook his head. “This changes everything. *Everything*. Thanks for the fucking heads up, Rozanov. There’s no way that this stays in this room. They’re going to have to kick it up to the league. I was prepared to defend your contract, say that the bondmate clause is airtight and they can’t hold it against you. I was prepared to argue that they should drop the fucking fines for missing games. Now, though. Fuck, the optics if this gets out—”

Ilya felt his heartbeat kick into a higher gear. “You really think it will be that bad?”

“Of course it’s going to be that bad, Rozanov! What did you expect? Oh, we are done after this. *You* might be done after this, if you don’t play your cards right.”

“Fuck,” he said.

“Yeah,” Mikhail said, snapping the folder shut with a dramatic click. Ilya watched as Mikhail took a moment to compose himself, his outraged expression replaced by his usual blandly professional mask.

“Well. Ready to face the fucking music?” Mikhail asked.

Ilya gulped, and followed Mikhail’s inside the boardroom, trying not to feel like a man being led to his execution.

After the game ended, Shane hung up with his parents and sat on the couch waiting for Ilya, trying not to freak out. His mom’s voice echoed in his ears – *He’s the face of the franchise!* – and while that was true, the longer the minutes ticked on, the more nervous he felt about how the meeting was going. Was a long meeting bad? It could mean they were strategizing. Or it could mean that they were chewing Ilya out over keeping this a secret for so long, accusing him of cheating, finding a loophole to void his contract, rescinding his work visa, and kicking him out of the country. Hypothetically. Just as one option of many, Shane was sure.

Three hours after the game ended, he heard the tell-tale sounds of Ilya’s code being punched into the front door and nearly fell over with how quickly he launched himself off the couch. Ilya walked in the front door looking... bad. A little shell-shocked, more than anything else.

“How did it go?” Shane asked, nerves beginning to bundle in his stomach.

Rather than answering verbally, Ilya pushed a feeling through the bond, a familiar wash of gray misery.

“Oh,” Shane said. “Fuck.”

Ilya took off his jacket, and Shane studied the slumped line of his shoulders. Without another word, he reached out and grabbed Ilya’s hand, walking him into the living room and pushing him onto the couch. He sat down beside him and pulled Ilya’s torso down into his lap, so that he could stroke his hands through his curls.

The bond curled warm with gratitude, and they sat there silently for a moment.

“Fuck,” Ilya said, and turned his face into Shane’s lap. Ilya’s shoulders hitched, and a few seconds later, Shane thought he could feel tears seeping into the fabric of his sweatpants. He ran a soothing hand up and down Ilya’s back, unable to do anything else. Shane’s ribs twinged, probably just imaginary sympathy like earlier. Still, he wondered if the position was putting strain on Ilya’s injury.

“Sorry,” Ilya said, once he turned his face out from Shane’s lap and found his voice again. “It was not so bad, really. I don’t know why I’m-”

“It’s okay,” Shane said, putting his hand back into Ilya’s curls. “Just. Tell me?”

“They say – fuck. Sorry. English is hard right now. They are... disappointed. Say missing games is bad. I say yes, I know, sorry. Cannot avoid. They say that is okay as long as it does

not happen again, because contract has a-- a thing. About soulmate, for emergency. But then we share paperwork, because they say they need to see, for legal stuff, and *you* being soulmate is not okay. Then they say, have to talk to the league. To figure out how to *handle* the situation. So that they know we are not *cheating*."

"Fuck."

"Also, I need a new agent," Ilya added as an afterthought, as if that wasn't monumental, career-shaking news.

"He dropped you over this? Are you fucking serious?"

Ilya nodded. Shane felt like his whole body was vibrating, panic and anger bouncing back and forth between them in the bond.

"It's not like we did this on purpose," Shane said. "Fuck."

Ilya rotated onto his back but kept his head in Shane's lap, so he was looking up at him. "I am sorry," he said.

"*You're* sorry?" Shane said. "For what?"

Ilya shrugged, and seemed to expect that Shane would find something to blame him for, as if this was in any way his fault.

"Fuck. Okay," Shane said, and then he scooted out from underneath Ilya's body while gently lowering Ilya's head to the couch. He stood and began pacing back and forth in Ilya's living room, while Ilya tracked him without moving from his position on the couch. That sounded bad. Really bad. Like, *getting kicked out of the league*, bad. He hated when something he was anxious about turned out to be exactly as bad as he'd feared.

"There has to be something we can do," Shane said. "There are... laws, and stuff. Anti-discrimination laws that include soulmates. We... we have a lawyer, right? She can fix this."

"You really want to fight the league like that?"

Shane paused in his pacing, staring at him. "I don't," he said. "Of course I don't."

"But you will?"

"They can't – we have to play. I'm not going to lose hockey over some bullshit like this. No fucking way."

"Ah, so our bond is bullshit," Ilya snarked, but Shane didn't respond, because he suddenly had to bend over and put his good hands on his knee, blinking stars out of his vision. Was this going to go public? He'd never wanted – he was already the poster boy for so many causes, he didn't want to do this –

Suddenly there were warm hands on his back, guiding him to the couch, and Shane was being gently pulled into the bulk of Ilya's body. The bond filled once again with the green feeling,

calm and deliberate. Shane closed his eyes and imagined himself sitting on their peaceful forest floor for a long, long time.

Yuna would be the first to admit that it took her a little while to adjust to the idea of Ilya Rozanov being her son's soulmate. Normally, when Shane was injured, she would have hovered a bit more, but she had decided on giving them some space to sort out what was clearly a complicated situation. Based on Shane's increasingly frantic phone calls once he'd arrived safely in Boston, it seemed like he'd finally followed her advice and sorted out their romantic relationship, at least. Now they just had to sort out the league. If Shane was determined to fight for this, she would be with him every step of the way. No one would keep her son from getting what he wanted, and if what he wanted was hockey and Ilya Rozanov, then hockey and Ilya Rozanov would be what he would get.

The office of the lawyer she had found was on the twentieth floor of a swanky glass-fronted office building in downtown Montreal. She walked through the doors first and up to the information desk to talk to the security personnel about their appointment. The boys trailed behind her, and Yuna resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Both Shane and Ilya looked about twelve years old, hiding in her skirts, out-of-place among all the office workers in their suits and designer coats. She knew Shane had to be dreading this meeting and was probably worried about being recognized, but it was still, she had to admit, a little funny to see Ilya Rozanov, unsure of himself and looking to her son for reassurance. Looking to *her* for reassurance, too.

Their lawyer came highly recommended as a specialist in soulbond law, with a particular interest in immigration. Yuna liked her immediately as they were ushered into the conference room where they would be meeting, as the other woman stood up to meet them and extended a firm, no-nonsense handshake.

"You must be Mrs. Hollander. Lovely to meet you. I'm Asha," she said.

"Yuna, please."

Asha turned her attention to Shane and Ilya, who introduced themselves politely but awkwardly. Once again, Yuna resisted the impulse to roll her eyes. It was a good thing that Shane was such a good hockey player. He had never liked business meetings, no matter how many he had to sit through in his life.

They settled at the conference table, Asha sitting at the head of the table with Yuna next to her.

"So," Asha said. "I've reviewed the documents you sent over, everything looks good. Your appointment to file the bond paperwork is tomorrow morning at 10 am, correct?"

Shane nodded mutely, and Yuna nudged him with her foot under the table.

"Uh, sorry. That's correct, ma'am," Shane said.

Asha nodded, spreading papers on the table in front of her. “And your retroactive date of bond filing is... December 2008?” she asked.

“Yes,” Shane said.

“Well. Eight years isn’t the longest I’ve seen, but that is quite a significant delay. I would expect a number of questions about your decision to avoid registering the bond during that meeting. We should prepare your answers now, since I won’t be allowed to be present for that meeting.”

Yuna winced. She knew that Shane was an adult who could handle himself, generally speaking, but there was a reason that she handled most of the paperwork, and a reason that Shane had an agent for the business negotiations that Yuna couldn’t handle. If she had her way, she and Asha would be the ones sitting in that meeting, but there was no way around it.

“They were minors when they bonded,” Yuna said. “Surely that warrants a degree of leniency.”

“Yes, and with Russia,” Ilya added from his place down the table.

“That’s correct, Mr. Rozanov,” Asha said. “That’s the argument that my office will make in the explanatory document that you’re filing tomorrow, and the argument that I will make in court if they decide to pursue civil penalties. We can argue that filing a same-sex soulmate pairing would have been actively dangerous and potentially detrimental to your careers. Speaking of which, filing this paperwork automatically makes you eligible to file for asylum in Canada, with a fast-tracked pathway to citizenship. Is that something that you’re interested in pursuing?”

Although the question had been directed at Ilya, Yuna turned to watch Shane from the corner of her eye. That had been something that Shane had been worried about, when he called her the previous week. *What if he regrets it?* he’d asked her over the phone, sounding so young. She hadn’t known what to tell him, other than *I know, honey, but that’s not your decision to make.*

“Yes,” Ilya said simply, and Asha nodded and scribbled a note on the legal pad in front of her.

“What about the league?” Yuna asked, and her heart was beating a little faster as she waited for the answer.

Asha sat back in her chair and grimaced. “Canada has some of the strongest non-discrimination laws against same-sex soulmate pairings, internationally. Protections in America aren’t quite as strong, unfortunately for you, Mr. Rozanov, but I think we would have reasonable grounds for a lawsuit brought in a Canadian court, if the league decides to pursue disciplinary action against you.”

“What if I moved to Canadian team?” Ilya asked, and everyone in the room swiveled to look at him. Shane and Yuna’s mouths both dropped a little open in shock.

“You would leave Boston?” Yuna asked him.

Ilya shrugged. “If it is easier to get Canadian citizenship, and I am closer to Shane, then yes. I would leave Boston.”

Yuna shot a glance at Asha, who was scribbling more notes. Shane was still staring at Ilya.

“That would certainly make things simpler, if only from a legal perspective,” Asha said. “But we’ll have to see how the league reacts.”

“How do *you* think they will react?” Yuna asked.

Asha considered for a second, tapping her pen against the table. “There isn’t a lot of precedent to gauge how they might proceed,” she said. “If you ask me, purely on the basis of statistics, I would assume you aren’t the first. It’s extremely common for soulmates to share a profession, and that’s especially the case in high-skill, high-pressure fields. So, by that logic, it’s almost impossible that you’re the first soulmate pairing in the NHL. Of course there are precedents in women’s professional hockey and the WNBA. But, if there are other bonded players in the men’s leagues, no one in the league has publicly acknowledged it.”

“That’s not—we don’t want to. Uh. Publicly acknowledge it,” Shane said.

Yuna winced. She knew, of course, that Shane would want to maintain his privacy, but fighting the league would likely mean making it public. She hoped he was ready for that. She wasn’t sure if she was.

“If we file a lawsuit, or the Canadian government does decide to pursue legal proceedings for the delayed bond filing, it *will* very likely become public knowledge, Mr. Hollander,” Asha said. “I can file a motion for closed court proceedings and pseudonyms given the level of public scrutiny and the sensitivity of soulbond cases, but those protections only go so far given the specifics I’ll have to disclose. Are you prepared for that?”

Yuna studied her son carefully, the way his eyes darted from side to side as he thought. She also saw, in the corner of her eye, how Ilya slipped a comforting hand onto his thigh under the table. It still was strange to see them together, but the more she did, the more she liked Ilya for Shane.

“I guess,” Shane answered eventually, and Ilya’s hand squeezed once on his thigh before he pulled back.

“Okay,” Asha said. “Well. Here are the notarized versions of the paperwork for your appointment. Please don’t hesitate to reach out with any further questions, and we’ll be in touch. Thank you again for coming in today.”

Yuna left the meeting with a lingering sense of trepidation, but at least she was reassured that they had a professional on their side. She hoped that Shane felt the same way, reassured that the people in his life would take care of him. It often seemed difficult for him to believe.

That evening, back in Shane's Montreal condo, Shane was a nervous wreck. Ilya watched him pace in circles around the kitchen island, then pace back and forth across the living room, alternating between muttering to himself and running his hands through his hair. Ilya considered the merits of pushing calm through the bond, but he thought that Shane, perhaps, needed to feel his feelings. Needed to bark and run around like an anxious chihuahua so he could tire himself out and finally take a nap.

Eventually, Shane ran out of energy and threw himself onto the couch across from Ilya, blowing out a dramatic sigh as he did so. "I'm sorry I'm freaking out," he said, and Ilya simply shook his head.

"Is okay," Ilya replied.

Shane covered his face with his hands and lay there a second. Ilya inspected the bond. Anxiety was the primary emotion, not that he needed the bond to tell him that, but there was also a surprising amount of guilt swirling through Shane.

"Why are you feeling guilty?" he asked. At the question, Shane removed his hands from his face and gave him a flat look.

"Would you get out of my head?" Shane asked.

Ilya was done pretending that the soulbond didn't exist, or that it didn't mean anything. If they were doing this, then they were doing it for real.

"No."

At his reply, Shane buried his face in his hands again. After a few moments, Shane mumbled something inaudible into his hands, and now Shane felt both anxious, guilty, irritated, *and* embarrassed in the bond. Great going, Ilya.

"What?" Ilya asked.

"I hate that we don't get to choose!" Shane repeated, removing his hands from his face to look at him with his big, wet, sad eyes. Fuck.

Ilya knew, of course. It was why he had spent the entire week at the cabin tiptoeing around Shane's feelings, trying to be considerate given the amount of choices that had been taken away from him. Still, he felt his stomach swoop at the thought that Shane might not choose him, given the chance. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Shane waved his hands in the air aimlessly. "Just. I know I'm... boring. Probably would have hated each other's guts if we weren't soulmates, eh?"

Ilya stared at him. That wasn't quite what he was expecting. When he recovered, he replied, "Ah. I see. This is joke. You are still trying to be funny guy."

"Fuck you. I'm not joking."

“No, no, you must be. You think there is a universe where I see your freckles and your ass and I leave you alone? Hollander. You wound me.”

That drew a smile out of Shane, at least. Ilya knew that it was true. Soulmate, not soulmate, it did not matter. He was here because he wanted to be.

“I am here today,” Ilya said. “That is my choice.”

“Sure,” Shane said, but he didn’t seem convinced.

Ilya sat up, leaning closer towards him. He had to get this right. “Yes, we are soulmates. That is true. That, we don’t choose. But as soon as your head is fixed, I can be anywhere in the fucking world. And I am right here, so we can go to boring Canadian meeting with boring Canadian paperwork. Okay?”

Shane finally relaxed, melting back into the couch, and the intense maelstrom of feelings in the bond calmed into a smoother sea. “Okay,” Shane said, and they lay there in companionable silence until it was time to scrape together some dinner.

As the son of an employee of the Canadian government, Shane was intimately familiar with the laborious process of entering a government building. They always had to give you some kind of stupid little visitor badge and send you down a confusing series of identical beige hallways, just to get you into the bureaucratic spirit. He wished he was visiting his dad in his office in Ottawa, instead of heading to an appointment with a soulbond registration specialist at the branch office in Montreal.

Shane was clutching the folder with their notarized paperwork like a lifeline when they arrived in the waiting room where they would be called for their appointment, once their number flashed on the television screen on the wall. They sat in the back corner, toques and sunglasses firmly in place, trying not to look suspicious as the drone of daytime television filled the room.

After what felt like an eternity, they were finally called back into a drab little cubicle down a short hallway. The woman working at the desk initially looked at them with disinterest from behind the plexiglass screen that separated her from the two visitor chairs, until she had their paperwork in her hands and registered two facts: first, their names, and second, their bond date.

“Confirm your names and dates of birth for me?” she said, but the way she was looking at them, Shane had a suspicion that she might already know. He just couldn’t tell whether that was going to help or hurt them, at this moment.

“Uh. Shane Hollander, May 10th, 1991.”

“Ilya Rozanov. June 15, 1991.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Bond date?”

“December 2008,” Shane dutifully replied. “The 22nd. We think.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “Passports?”

They dutifully handed over their documents, which she opened and closed quickly enough that she clearly already knew they were who they said they were. She spent a few more awful minutes typing something into the clunky PC on her desk, the clacking of the keyboard loud enough that it almost made Shane wince.

“Well,” she said, leaning forward to look at them. “You don’t see that every day.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed. Shane gulped. Here it came.

The woman – the little name plate on her desk announced that her name was Susan – flipped through the stack of paperwork she had been handed. “Do you have – ah, yes. Form 9B42, justification for delayed filing.”

Asha’s office had prepared that version of the form for them, and they had added their signatures last night. The document had been filled with very official-sounding legal language that honestly went a little bit over Shane’s head, but he hoped it would be enough. He didn’t know what he would do if it wasn’t.

Susan skimmed through the document, nodding a bit to herself as she did. “Well,” she said. “I see. You’re claiming same-sex bondmate discrimination due to national origin, with the additional mitigating factors of potential professional repercussions as justification for the delayed filing. Is that correct?”

“Uh. Yes?” Shane said, trying to sound more certain than he felt. He could feel Ilya’s nerves through the bond, which was not currently helping.

Susan simply nodded, and then she was pulling out a stamp and thunking down the stamp on several pages. She fed their paper through a scanner on her desk, then continued typing loudly on her computer and aggressively clicking her way through whatever form she was filling out. Shane felt his heart lurch, then start pounding against his ribcage. Could it really be that easy?

“And Mr. Rozanov, you would like to proceed with the asylum application?”

“Yes.”

Susan nodded again, looking wholly unphased. “We’ll need to refer you to the citizenship office for assistance with that,” she said. “But your paperwork all seems in order.”

“That’s it?” Shane asked.

“That’s it,” Susan said with a small smile. “Now. Were you looking to have the strength of your bond measured today?”

Oh, fuck. Shane wasn’t sure if he was ready for that. He thought the bond was strong, but what if it wasn’t? What if their bond was super weak and actually about to snap, and then he

and Ilya would go their separate ways forever?

“Do we have to?” he asked.

Susan shrugged. “Technically it’s a requirement for registration and renewal, but it doesn’t have to be today. We can schedule you an appointment, or they usually take walk-ins.”

“We can do it here?” Ilya asked, perhaps sensing that Shane was about to lose his nerve. He probably wasn’t wrong.

Susan nodded, then shook her head. “Here, but not in this office. You just have to go to the state soulbond clinic in the next building over. You can take the back exit from this appointment. Just go down this hallway, take a left at the water cooler, take a right at the bathrooms, go down the back stairs, cross the parking lot, go in the third door on your left, the one with the glass door. Then you’re going to want to hang a left, talk to Marvin at the desk to sign in, wait in the waiting room. They should be able to fit you in today.”

Shane and Ilya stared at her. “Do you have a map?” Shane asked.

She did.

When they finally found their way to the clinic after taking three wrong turns, Ilya found himself oddly nervous in the waiting room. He couldn’t stop bouncing his leg, even though he knew that it drove Shane crazy. The first appointment had been much easier than he expected, but everyone had been so focused on the legal eventualities that they had apparently neglected that this was the usual *second* part of the appointment.

When they were finally gestured into a room, the nurse who explained the process to them was using many words that were unfamiliar to Ilya, like *electrodes* and *EEG*. Shane was nervous in the bond and shuffling beside him as they sat side-by-side in chairs in the medical office. Then again, Shane being nervous was more of a baseline state, so it didn’t really give Ilya much of a clue as to how he should feel about the procedure.

They were brought into a new room, where there were two large reclined chairs sat back-to-back, as if prepared for a tandem dentist appointment. Each of them was directed to a chair by a nurse, and then funny little caps with wires all over them were placed on their heads. Ilya wished he could see Shane, because he would probably look very stupid. These wires were then hooked up to computers and calibrated, and they were apparently ready to begin.

The nurse walked them through a series of exercises that Ilya found rather silly. *Visualize the bond. Describe the strength of it, the way it feels in your head. Ilya, please tell me what Shane is feeling, in as much detail as you can with the bond in a neutral state. Good. Shane, same for you. More detail, please. Try to block each other out of the bond. Shane, can you tell what Ilya is feeling? Ilya, the same? Okay, reopen the bond. Ilya, try pulling on the bond, see if you can tell me anything that Shane is thinking. Shane, same for you. He’s thinking that he would like to be done with this stupid test? Okay, a few more exercises, and then you’ll be free to go. Describe the moment that you bonded. I see in your chart that you recently*

sustained a concussion, Shane, please tell me about how that felt for both of you. Good. Good, wow. Okay.

Their bond was a level 4, with the potential to grow into a level 5. Ilya didn't know what that meant, really, but Shane seemed a little stunned by the news. He explained a little as they made their way back to the car – that Level 7 was the highest, extremely rare, and it was difficult for people with bonds that strong to be apart for significant lengths of time. Those were the kinds of extreme cases that ended up on the news. With a Level 6 bond, sharing thoughts was significantly easier than with lower-level bonds, and being separated for extended periods of time was still difficult, even if it wasn't quite as dangerous. Level 5 was where you started to share limited amounts of bodily sensations like injury, which was apparently on the table for them. Not great, given their line of work, even if the neural sensation of pain was all that transferred rather than the injury itself.

Level 4, where they currently measured on the high end, involved full transfer of emotions with limited transfer of thoughts. Their bond was also strong enough that it could not be broken without, to quote the nurse, “severe psychic injury,” which was apparently a concern at Level 3 and higher. Thank god they weren't planning on breaking the bond, but Shane seemed worried about this particular revelation. “What if they try to make us break it anyway?” he'd asked Ilya on their walk out to the parking lot, but Ilya had only frowned. That was probably illegal, right?

All in all, however, by the time they climbed into Shane's extremely boring Land Rover, Ilya was feeling a little giddy. Part of it was exhaustion, yes, but today had gone far better than he ever could have anticipated. He could tell that Shane was also feeling the relief of the appointment having gone well, and Ilya was just contemplating whether he should go for mutual blowjobs or something a little more ambitious when Shane's phone started ringing with an unknown number.

“Hello?” Shane said, putting the call on speaker as he drove.

“Shane Hollander?” came a masculine voice from the other end of the line. “This is Steven from Commissioner Crowell's office. We'd like you and Ilya Rozanov to come to the Montreal NHL offices first thing tomorrow morning.”

Oh fuck, Shane whispered under his breath before answering. “Uh. Any particular time?”

“9 am sharp, please. We can expect you there?”

“Uh. Yes. Sure,” Shane said, and his voice was a little squeaky.

“Great. Till then,” Steven said, and then hung up.

Well, fuck. Mutual blowjobs were probably off the table, Ilya thought. Unless they were absolutely necessary to calm Shane down, which wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

When they entered the swanky conference room Crowell's office the next morning, Shane was shocked to find that Crowell wasn't alone. The general manager of the Voyageurs, an older man named Brad who Shane had rarely interacted with outside of his professional capacity as captain, was sitting to Crowell's left at the conference table. Another man who Shane assumed was the general manager of the Bears was sitting next to Brad—he had the mustache for a general manager. There was also some kind of speaker sitting on the table in front of them, with a blinking red light that indicated that someone was on conference call, and Shane immediately imagined coaches and team owners and assistants and all kinds of other people on the other end of the call, everyone ready to pick their relationship apart.

Shane was immediately glad that he and Ilya also hadn't come alone. Farah had flown in on the red-eye to accompany them, and Asha led the way into the room. If they weren't there, Shane wasn't sure what he would have done in that moment. Sprinted right back out of the office building, dragging Ilya with him, to go hide in the forest forever? Both women introduced themselves to the room with steely professionalism as they took their seats on the opposite side of the conference table. They had already warned Shane and Ilya to let them do most of the talking, which would *not* be a problem.

"Well, gentlemen," Commissioner Crowell said. "This meeting is a little more crowded than I would like, but it is what it is. But first, I want to ask: what do you have to say for yourselves?"

"You don't have to answer that," Asha interrupted coolly. "We're here to discuss Mr. Hollander and Mr. Rozanov's future in the NHL, not their personal feelings about this situation."

"Future in the NHL?" Crowell asked, as if it was an astonishing concept that two of the best players might expect that they would still walk out of this meeting with a career. "Well. Fine, we'll talk shop. I just wanted to give them a chance to explain how they could let such a fucking *shitshow* build up for this long. We got the paperwork your office faxed over. Am I understanding correctly that you've been bonded since 2008? Since the *beginning* of your careers? And are only bothering to register and inform the league *now*?"

"Their bond has now been legally registered," Asha said. "Law enforcement is not the NHL's concern. The Canadian government has accepted their legal reasoning for delayed filing of their bond, due to substantial mitigating factors such as *potential professional repercussions*."

"Plus, I've pulled the statistics together," Farah said. "Their stats in games played against each other aren't meaningfully different from their overall statistics. If anything, they both play slightly better in games against each other, which I think speaks to their professionalism and respect for the game."

Crowell scoffed. Farah didn't blink. Shane tried very hard not to slump in his chair, not to let his shoulders hunch forward. Ilya was like a stone next to him, silent and stiff.

"How strong is this bond?" the general manager of the Bears asked. Shane should really figure out his name. If he'd introduced himself, Shane had been too in his head to register it.

Asha slid the printout of the assessment they had been given at the government facility across the table. "Level 4," she said.

On the other side of the table, multiple people sucked in surprised breaths through their teeth. Level 4 was clearly stronger than they'd expected.

"The professional assessment at the government soulbond clinic was that this bond could not be broken without 'severe psychic injury,'" Asha continued. "Also, demanding that an employee break a soulbond, especially due to the gender or sexuality of the partner involved, is a severe violation of Canadian employment law."

"We're not a Canadian team," the Bears GM responded.

"It's also a violation of American civil rights law," Asha replied. "Plus, the bond is registered in Canada, to correspond with the location of their initial bonding and Mr. Hollander's nationality. That affords certain levels of protections due to bilateral treaties with the United States."

Crowell waved a hand, clearly dismissing all the arguments being laid on the table in front of him. "Be that as it may, we can't have them competing against each other on the ice. There's no way to confirm that they aren't cheating."

"As I have just stated, there is no statistical proof that either of my clients have played differently against each other. If anything, it seems to motivate them to play harder," Farah said.

"We don't want Rozanov pulling our plays, our secrets, out of Hollander's head," said Brad, the Voyageurs GM. "This is a privacy concern. Hollander's contract stipulates against sharing privileged information with other teams, under any circumstances."

"And do you have any proof that he has shared privileged information?" Asha asked.

"Look, none of this matters," Crowell said. "You're not playing against one another, and that's final. This doesn't leave this room, but as teammates... well. You wouldn't be the first. But you will have to find a team willing to take both of you."

"I am willing to move teams," Ilya said quietly.

Shane looked at Brad, a pit sinking in his stomach at the dour expression on the older man's face. Sure enough, Brad shook his head. "Voyageurs senior leadership has discussed this, and we've decided that's a dynamic we don't want in our locker room."

"My contract is good for another two years," Shane said, numb. Farah nudged him under the table, and he remembered that he was supposed to be letting her do the talking.

Brad shook his head again. "We'd rather buy you out of your contract than sign Rozanov. We don't want the press if this gets out, or scrutiny around your... relationship. So. Unless Rozanov is willing to retire, you will need to find a team willing to take both of you. And that team will not be Montreal."

Farah folded her hands and leaned forward. "I would like to remind you that Shane, your team's *captain*, has led you to two Stanley Cup victories and the team looks poised to have a strong chance in the playoffs again next year, even if this season was cut short by injury. You would really jeopardize that legacy over something that has not affected Mr. Hollander or Mr. Rozanov's ability to play as professionals in this league since the beginning of their careers?"

"And I would like to remind you that I don't give a shit," Brad said. "Our decision is final."

The room turned to look at Boston's general manager, who was sitting back in his chair with a frown on his face. "Don't look at me," he said, when he realized all eyes in the room were on him. "We don't have the cap space for Hollander, even if we wanted him."

Shane was definitely going to throw up. He hadn't really thought that Ilya would walk out of this meeting as a new member of the Voyageurs, but this was far worse than he'd anticipated. Everything he'd done for them over the years, everything he'd sacrificed to be the best player and the best leader for his team, and it meant nothing?

"We're willing to sue," Asha said. "I am thoroughly prepared to argue that this kind of treatment is a violation of Canadian employment law."

Crowell hardly glanced at her, glaring at Shane and Ilya in turns. "You're really prepared for that kind of publicity?"

Shane definitely was not. Thankfully, he was not the one doing the talking here.

"My clients are prepared to assert their rights to play without being discriminated against," Asha answered, and then she was standing. Farah stood too, and Shane and Ilya numbly followed their lead.

"I think we're done here," Asha continued. "You'll be hearing from my office. Good day, gentlemen."

"Holy fuck," Shane said, and he looked like he was on the verge of flying to pieces. They were back in the apartment, Shane once again pacing while Ilya sat on the couch. Ilya didn't really know how they would have gotten back to the apartment if Yuna hadn't arranged for a car to pick them up. The words from the meeting were still echoing in his head, *a dynamic we don't want in our locker room* and *discrimination* and *I don't give a shit*.

"Shane," he said, trying to calm him down even though it felt like they were a million miles away from each other. Shane's feelings were so intense that he couldn't make sense of them in the bond. Attempting to reach him mentally felt like sticking his hand against the static of an old TV.

"Hooooooly fuck, this is the worst day of my life," Shane continued. "I thought the concussion was the worst day of my life, but no. This is it. It can't get any worse than this."

"*Shane.*"

“What?” he said, pausing his furious pacing for the first time since they’d walked in the door. He hadn’t even taken his shoes off, a sure sign of his extreme distraction and distress.

“It will be okay,” Ilya said, trying to believe it.

“You don’t know that!” Shane yelled, throwing his arm out.

“I do,” he said. “We have fancy lawyer, we have fancy agent, we have your scary mom. They will figure it out.”

He stood, reaching out for Shane to try and soothe him physically, since he currently couldn’t reach him in the bond. Gently, he guided Shane until the other man was pressed against his shoulder, breathing rabbit-quick into the collar of his shirt. Shane hung there, for a miserable moment, but his breathing did calm down a little bit, at the very least.

“What are we going to do if no one wants to take us?” Shane asked.

“Someone will.”

“What if they don’t?”

Ilya rubbed a hand up and down his back. He knew that hockey was different for Shane than it was for him. He would get Canadian citizenship now, regardless of his employment status. Thanks to Mikhail’s strong contract-negotiating abilities, he had millions of dollars in the bank. That money would have to last a very long time, but at the very least, there was no danger of immediately going broke. He owned his home in Boston outright, and could sell it if necessary. He could sell his fancy cars. And, most importantly, he and Shane had finally acknowledged what they were to each other. They were standing here holding one another rather than living in separate cities, pretending that the universe had made a mistake and that they meant nothing to each other.

“Then we will be fine, because we have each other,” he said.

Shane pulled back a little bit, searching his eyes. The bond was also calming, and he could feel, in that moment, how intensely Shane loved him. He let himself bask in the feeling. That was no small thing.

“Really?” Shane asked.

“Really,” he replied, and this time he was sure, even though the situation was far from ideal.

“Fuck,” Shane said, and buried his face back in Ilya’s neck.

“It will be fine. We will be okay. Even if we end up somewhere very boring, like Ottawa,” he said, starting to sway them from side to side.

“Hey, that’s my hometown team,” Shane protested.

“Yes, that is why they are so boring.”

They clung together for a long moment before navigating back over to the couch. Shane's eyes were red and glassy, although Ilya couldn't tell if he had actually allowed himself to cry. They sat side-by-side, huddled, hands still intertwined even as they leaned against each other.

"Are you sure about all of this?" Shane asked, in a whisper. Ilya wanted to laugh. His soulmate could be a little ridiculous, sometimes.

"A little late to be asking, that, Hollander."

"No, I know. It's just... fuck. You're giving up your *country*. Your team. Everything."

"Yes," Ilya said, because it was true.

Shane looked up at him, pinned him with those beautiful dark brown eyes. "Are you... are you sure you won't regret it?" he asked.

Ilya looked at him carefully. "I will say this once, Shane Hollander, so you will listen to me, okay?"

Shane nodded, looking as serious as he ever did. He was beautiful.

"I don't know why the universe decided we should be soulmates. In the beginning I thought it was mistake, or some kind of joke. But now I know that the universe was right, this whole time. There is no one for me but you."

"No one for me but you," Shane repeated, and let out a shuddering breath, releasing at least half of the tension that had wound its way into his body. "I love you."

"Ya tebya lyublyu," Ilya responded.

Shane cracked a watery little smile. "Who gave you permission to be so romantic?"

Ilya winked at him. "You don't remember? It was you. December, 2008."

After that, there didn't seem to be all that much more to say. Neither of them had any idea what the future would bring, but Ilya was suddenly firm in his conviction that everything would be all right. Like he always did in uncertain moments like these, Ilya felt his mother watching over him. With Farah, and Asha, and Yuna, and Irina on their side, they would find their way home.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know how this whole chapter turned into bureaucracy and made-up soulmate law/soulmate medicine 😊 if I have massacred your field of work and you're reading this, I am so sorry

This chapter in particular owes a lot to the sidgeno fic I was reading in 2018, especially the idea of bonds having different levels that can be measured

The last chapter will be an epilogue. Stay tuned!

Chapter 8: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

thanks for sticking with me through this fic that got a LOT longer and more involved than I was anticipating. This is the longest piece of fiction I've ever written. 2025 Canadian-government funded yaoi you will always be famous

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Transcript, television broadcast on TSN5 Ottawa, October 5th, 2017.

Carter Dale: Good evening, Ottawa, and welcome to TSN's pregame analysis for the first regular season game of your hometown Ottawa Centaurs. I'm your host, Carter Dale.

Chip Stevens: And I'm your cohost, Chip Stevens.

CD: Thank you for being here, Chip. Now, of course we like to keep the focus on the ice and off of players' personal lives, for the most part, but our main topic of discussion this evening has to be Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov in their first regular season game for the Centaurs. There's no way around it, folks.

CS: Agreed. Biggest sports story of the year, and that's saying something. It's been an eventful year for the NHL.

CD: You can say that again. Remember when we thought the Admirals' historic Cup run would be the biggest hockey story of the year? *laughs*

CS: Right. *laughs* You have to wonder how Scott Hunter feels. I mean, coming out as gay at the Stanley Cup finals, and the news breaks the next week about Rozanov and Hollander moving to Ottawa together. I mean, I would be a little bit mad, I have to say it. If I was gay, and not married to my lovely wife of twenty years. Hi, honey.

CD: I remember the speculation during that week after the news broke. I'd never been more confused by a trade in my entire professional career as a commentator. Until, of course, the news about the soulbond broke a week later, and they posted their joint statement on Instagram.

CS: Same. I remember exactly where I was when I saw that news article. I mean, talk about game-changing. Do you think Rozanov planned for the news to come out this year just to one-up Hunter?

CD: I wouldn't put it past Rozanov, really. *laughs* The discussion hasn't died down much over the summer, though. The scrutiny on their move to Ottawa has been very intense.

CS: It has. And I know there are some people who feel it's not fair for so much focus to be on players' personal lives, including a number of players from other teams who have been vocal in the media about their frustration. You have to wonder how Hollander and Rozanov were received in the Ottawa locker room.

CD: I do want to note that there has also been a tremendous amount of support, including from the former captains of Team USA and Team Canada in women's hockey, who announced their bond after they retired. But Hollander and Rozanov are active players, Chip. The fans and other players aren't just going to ignore this.

CS: True. And, look, Carter, we can't dance around the issue: I understand why there would be concerns about the fairness of having them on the same team at all. Of course, they both play center, so they will spend most of the game on separate lines, but in the preseason, we've seen them on the same powerplay unit with Rozanov on wing. I mean, is that fair to the other teams?

CD: Well. It's Hollander and Rozanov on the same line. I don't think there's any possibility that the other teams will think it's fair.

CS: **laughing** True. Well. Coach Wiebe has been very clear that he expects his locker room to be professional, and we both know how important the coaching staff can be for setting the tone around new players. You can't deny that Ottawa has taken the opportunity to gain unprecedented depth at center, and at a fairly low price for players of this caliber.

CD: True. But the question remains: why Ottawa?

CS: **hesitates** Well. Although we don't know exactly what happened behind the scenes, there have been some nasty rumors swirling, which I won't repeat here. It seems like a salary cut was the sacrifice that Hollander and Rozanov made in order to find a team that would take on both of them, and take on the insanity of the media spectacle. Still, despite it all, I wouldn't be surprised if Boston and Montreal come to immensely regret this trade.

CD: It'll certainly be an exciting season to watch here in Ottawa, Chip. Now, after the commercial break...

Shane was shrugging his shoulders like a boxer about to take to the ring, eyes screwed shut, ignoring the room around him. Ilya still wasn't used to the sight of him in an Ottawa Centaurs jersey after so many years of seeing him in Voyageurs blue.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Shane only nodded. Ilya tugged gently on their bond, teasing, ignoring the rush of nervous energy that tried to crowd through into his own brain. He turned to the room at large, opening his arms wide.

"Okay, listen up!" he yelled. "I am not in Boston anymore, I know this, but in Boston I learned one very important thing: how to send Montreal home crying. Let's fucking get it

done!”

The team was still a little unsure of them, a little awed. But there also hadn’t been any outright hostility, and Ilya thought, with a little time and some good hockey, they would be welcome here. Their teammates roared appropriately at his words and began to head down the tunnel.

He and Shane went out last. He risked tapping his helmet gently against Shane’s, resisting the urge to go for an ass slap, and sent a brief burst of reassurance through the bond. Shane still looked a little shaky, but something settled in his shoulders at the gesture. Ilya grinned. His boyfriend was a great fucking hockey player, and he knew how to do this.

Ilya followed Shane out, the last one down the tunnel for warmups. This was going to be a good fucking season. He could feel it already.

Transcript, television broadcast on TSN5 Ottawa, October 5th, 2017.

Kayleigh Vaughn: This is Kayleigh Vaughn, broadcasting live at center ice for TSN5 in Ottawa. Thanks for having me, Carter.

Carter Dale: Thanks for being with us, Kayleigh. Tell us about what you’ve seen in warmups, so far.

KV: This game has been one of the most highly anticipated early matchups since the regular season lineup was announced mid-July, and based on what I’ve seen in warmups, I think it may live up to the hype.

CD: Interesting. Tell me more about what you’re seeing on the ice tonight.

KV: Well, we all know it’s not uncommon for there to be some lingering hostility after a trade, especially with a star player going to another team. But what I’ve seen from Montreal so far definitely seems to exceed that kind of resentment. These players are chomping at the bit for some action, and I would expect a fast, physical game. I would be astonished if we walked out of here without witnessing a fight.

CD: Thank you, Kayleigh. We’ll check back in as the game progresses. But for now, our pregame statistical analysis segment, presented by Canadian Tire...

David knew that it was a little silly, but he still got nervous watching Shane warm up for hockey games. Just his luck that the national pastime involved giant men skating around on blades, slamming into each other at full speed, and occasionally punching each other in the face. He still bore the creaky knees and false teeth as souvenirs of his own hockey career, short as it had been. Even this far into Shane’s professional career, David sometimes still saw his little boy, 4-years old and wobbling during his first time on ice skates, with an adorable frown of determination on his face.

Yuna teased David about his nerves, from time to time, but he could tell through their bond that she was also rather nervous about tonight. It had been a hell of a year. He was proud of his son for how he'd handled an impossible situation. He was proud of his wife and her fierce determination. And, increasingly, he was proud of his not-quite-yet-son-in-law Ilya Rozanov, a thought that felt less surreal with every passing day.

Shane and Hayden were talking in the neutral zone during warmups, and even from his seat in the stands, he thought he could see a number of glares from other Montreal players at such a casual gesture of camaraderie with someone they'd played with for years. Montreal's coaches were already whispering behind the bench, eyes on Shane.

It would be a tough season. The speculation simply would not die down. But if David knew Shane, and he thought he did, then he knew his son would rise above it all, motivated by his work ethic, the same fierce determination he saw in Yuna, and his love for the game. Also, he supposed, by his love for Ilya. His soulmate.

David still worried about Shane. He was a dad, he couldn't help it. It did ease something in him, however, to know that Shane was not going through this alone. He had a partner who would be there through thick and thin, sickness and health, just like David and Yuna after they bonded all those years ago. And no matter what happened on the ice or on social media, Shane would have a solid point to hold onto, and a truly unstoppable team of people who loved him.

Transcript, television broadcast on TSN5 Ottawa, October 5th, 2017.

Carter Dale: And we are headed for the puck drop in one of the most highly anticipated matchups of the season, which also happens to be the season opener. Go figure. We have Hollander heading out from the Montreal – no, sorry. Huh, that's still weird. We have Hollander heading out from the *Ottawa* bench, of course, to take the first face-off of the game...

Shane very rarely kept his side of the bond closed these days, preferring to feel the true weight of the connection between them. Every time, for Shane, it felt like someone reaching out to take his hand in a dark room, a startling reminder that he was not alone even inside his own head. He had always secretly loved how it intensified the games they played against each other, when they were still on opposing teams. It didn't have to be a secret anymore, he supposed.

As he lined up for the first face-off of the game, which Ilya had insisted to Coach Wiebe that Shane should take even though Ilya would normally be the starting-line center, Shane swallowed down his nerves to find the razor-edged focus that carried him through most hockey games. The Montreal player across from him was young and new to the team, a center from Colorado that they'd traded for in the shuffle after his departure.

He didn't know if it was a memory or a thought that Ilya was pushing through the bond to tease him, but he suddenly heard an echo of Ilya's voice, all those years ago. *Shane Hollander: Will you disappoint them?*

This year had been the most overwhelming of his career. He'd thought that nothing could be worse than the scrutiny of their rookie season, when the League was taking every opportunity to pit Ilya and Shane against each other and the bond was something they could barely acknowledge.

He'd been wrong.

Everyone wanted a piece of them, as soon as the story broke – an interview, a juicy soundbite, a photograph whether they'd agreed to be photographed or not. He'd handed control of his social media accounts to Farah's team and hadn't regretted it for a second. Ilya spent a week ragebaiting homophobes on Twitter until Asha advised him to stop, at which point he took to posting increasingly cryptic Instagram stories about the situation and their relationship.

Ilya, if anything, seemed relieved to have their secret out in the open. Shane wasn't sure he was there yet. He often found himself thinking about Scott Hunter's MVP speech from that June: *When you have a secret that you work as hard as I did to protect, it's exhausting. It's a non-stop effort. And it's also really, really lonely.* Shane thought that was probably true, but it was also exhausting to walk into a room where everyone thought they knew you, before you'd ever spoken a word to them. He'd thought that he was used to that feeling, but it was far worse whenever he and Ilya walked into a room together. He was still learning not to flinch when Ilya brushed against him in a silent gesture of support.

At least, after more complicated contract negotiations and tense business meetings than Shane had ever thought he would have to endure, he and Ilya were back on NHL ice. Shane had been dreading tonight as soon as the regular-season lineup was announced in July, when they were still tucked away at the cottage and hidden away from the world. Ilya had to talk him off the ledge before this game at least, like, four times. Shane hoped he would be able to return the favor when they played Boston, where Ilya was still sad that things had ended badly.

He still needed to find his footing in Ottawa, and there were a million and one things he was worried about. How to click with new linemates. How the locker room would feel, now that they were out. How to ensure that Ottawa management felt they were worth the risk and the scrutiny. How to keep living his life when he felt like a bug under a microscope, under close inspection and liable to burn. As he fell into position at the red line, however, he felt all those other concerns drop away in favor of that one, simple question: *will you disappoint them?*

No matter the circumstances, no matter the team, his answer to that question would always be the same: he wouldn't disappoint them. And he knew in his bones that Ilya would never disappoint him, not in the ways that really mattered.

His stomach fluttered, but it didn't feel like nerves anymore. More like anticipation. As Shane waited for the referee to drop the puck, a roaring hunger reverberated through the bond

between Ilya and Shane, singing with the satisfaction that they were the best, and together, and no one could take this away from them.

Shane won the face-off, and then they were off.

Chapter End Notes

I have some oneshots in the pipeline (including a lunar new year fic already written for february!!), so keep an eye out for more from me. Also, if you enjoyed this, I have written a number of other fics for heated rivalry at this point– I'm particular fond of [after the rain](#), which is a coming-of-age fic about being queer in locker rooms.

Finally, fandom is about community -- feel free to talk to me on tumblr or discord @oldguardians! I'm also part of [the Haven discord server](#), if you're looking for creative community for writing/art

End Notes

I'm on tumblr @oldguardians

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!